

Light the Chalice

The chalice flame guides us out of the darkness:
When we are depressed or saddened,
When we need help,
When we need support.

The chalice flame guides us into the light:
When we become bright and cheery,
When there is something pleasant to tell,
When we become more capable and stronger.

With the chalice flame we celebrate together:
When we gather as one,
When we identify together,
When we are in this place.

Openings

We came into this world without invitation, and we do not ask permission to leave. We rise to birth that always ends in death; we come just as we go.

The road travelled comes with its great riches, and anyone should be content with the few material possessions gained in a lifetime: for we brought nothing into the world, and neither may we carry anything out. We are come from the ashes of the stars and back to stardust we go.

Let our light be open to where all desires are known and no secrets hidden; exposure cleanses so that we may one time perfectly love. Let justice and mercy spread abroad and peace come to us all. We pray in mind of the bodies and souls of the earth's servants and handmaidens, to find in life and death a place of refreshing, and blessedness, and so enjoy the glory of the eternal light beyond light.

[Hymn](#) SF 200 Darwalls 148th

Meditation on Time

So time began when everything first went bang. Time ends in black hole singularities, but nowhere else. Scientists once said time would end when everything would shrink and go crunch. But now scientists say the universe will expand forever.

Time will never end, but one day nothing will exist to experience its passing. This is so so so far away. But the earth: it is half way through its time, with five billion years to go. This is because the sun will flare up, and the earth will be toast. But, surely, for humans, time will end in some millions of years if not before because either we will evolve out, or our planet will be hit by a comet or asteroid and we will go the way of the dinosaurs. Although, some now say, the birds that fly above aren't just descended from dinosaurs: birds are dinosaurs.

But time is experienced by the self-conscious, and consciousness is individual. For every human, time is only for tens of years, and that's it. We inherit into our short time the time of other events and creatures, but our time is short. Our mark is made in tens of years, and that's it. Then we are added to the Library of Achievement and Remembrance, for others to use.

So what of it?

In the future, there is but one certainty in life: we shall each lie horizontally and have lost all animation. Before those curtains close, for the final goodbye, others may speak. Long-standing friends know us best, and some cannot be fooled; the family, for many, is the place of intimate knowledge.

Can we be summarised in just half of one hour? What will they say? What will be our ethical story? They will say, "This is who this person was." They may not know about all those little contributions made. They may well not know, either, all the little deceptions taken. But they will have some well-grounded knowledge. And they will say, "Here was this person."

A Prayer for Desert Times by Margaret A. Keip

The journeys of our lives are never fully charted. There come to each of us deserts to cross - barren stretches - where the green edge on the horizon may be our destination, or an oasis on our way, or a mirage that beckons only to leave us lost.

When fear grips the heart, or despair bows the head, may we bend as heart and head lead us down to touch the ground beneath our feet. May we scoop some sand into our hands and receive what the sand would teach us:

It holds the warmth of the sun when the sun has left our sight, as it holds the cool of the night when the stars have faded. Hidden among its grains are tiny seeds, at rest and waiting, dormant yet undefeated.

Desert flowers. They endure. Moistened by our tears and by the rains which come to end even the longest drought, they send down roots and they bloom.

May we believe in those seeds, and in the seeds within us. May we remember in our dry seasons that we, too, are desert flowers. Amen.

[Source: 1997 Margaret A. Keip UUMA Worship Materials Collection; altered]

Music: Pink Floyd *Fat Old Sun*

When that fat old sun in the sky is
falling,
Summer evening birds are calling.

Summer's thunder time of year,
The sound of music in my ears.

Distant bells,
New mown grass smells so sweet.
By the river holding hands,
Roll me up and lay me down.

And if you sit,
Don't make a sound.
Pick your feet up off the ground.
And if you hear as the warm night falls
The silver sound from a time so strange,
Sing to me, sing to me.

When that fat old sun in the sky is
falling,
Summer evening birds are calling.

Children's laughter in my ears,
The last sunlight disappears.

And if you sit,
Don't make a sound.
Pick your feet up off the ground.
And if you hear as the warm night falls
The silver sound from a time so strange,
Sing to me, sing to me.

When that fat old sun in the sky is
falling...

Readings Psalm 41

1 Happy are those who consider the poor; the Lord delivers them in the day of trouble. 2 The Lord protects them and keeps them alive; they are

called happy in the land. You do not give them up to the will of their enemies. 3 The Lord sustains them on their sickbed; in their illness you heal all their infirmities. 4 As for me, I said, 'O Lord, be gracious to me; heal me, for I have sinned against you.' 5 My enemies wonder in malice when I will die, and my name perish. 6 And when they come to see me, they utter empty words, while their hearts gather mischief; when they go out, they tell it abroad. 7 All who hate me whisper together about me; they imagine the worst for me. 8 They think that a deadly thing has fastened on me, that I will not rise again from where I lie. 9 Even my bosom friend in whom I trusted, who ate of my bread, has lifted the heel against me. 10 But you, O Lord, be gracious to me, and raise me up, that I may repay them. 11 By this I know that you are pleased with me; because my enemy has not triumphed over me. 12 But you have upheld me because of my integrity, and set me in your presence for ever. 13 Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Amen and Amen. [NRSV]

2 Maccabees chapter 12 verses 42b -.45

[In those days:] The noble Judas exhorted the people to keep themselves free from sin, for they had seen with their own eyes what had happened as the result of the sin of those who had fallen. 43 He also took up a collection, man by man, to the amount of two thousand drachmas of silver, and sent it to Jerusalem to provide for a sin-offering. In doing this he acted very well and honourably, taking account of the resurrection. 44 For if he were not expecting that those who had fallen would rise again, it would have been superfluous and foolish to pray for the dead. 45 But if he was looking to the splendid reward that is laid up for those who fall asleep in godliness, it was a holy and pious thought. Therefore he made atonement for the dead, so that they might be delivered from their sin. [NRSV]

Proverbial Poem

Monday's child is fair of face,
Tuesday's child is full of grace,
Wednesday's child is full of woe,
Thursday's child has far to go,
Friday's child is loving and giving,
Saturday's child works hard for its living,
And a child that's born on the Sabbath day
Is fair and wise and good and gay.

Althea

Richard Lovelace's (1618-1658) poem, *To Althea from Prison* (1649):

When Love with unconfined wings
Hovers within my Gates;
And my divine Althea brings
To whisper at the Grates:
When I lye tangled in her haire,
And fetter'd to her eye;
The Birds, that wanton in the Aire,
Know no such Liberty.

When flowing Cups run swiftly round
With no allaying Thames,
Our carelesse heads with Roses bound,
Our hearts with Loyall Flames;
When thirsty grieffe in Wine we steepe,
When Healths and draughts go free,
Fishes that tipple in the Deepe,
Know no such Libertie.

When (like committed Linnets) I
With shriller throat shall sing
The sweetness, Mercy, Majesty,
And glories of my KING;
When I shall voyce aloud, how Good
He is, how Great should be;
Inlarged Winds that curle the Flood,
Know no such Liberty.

Stone Walls doe not a Prison make,
Nor Iron bars a Cage;
Mindes innocent and quiet take
That for an Hermitage;
If I have freedome in my Love,
And in my soule am free;
Angels alone that soar above,
Injoy such Liberty.

Music: The Grateful Dead *Althea*

I told Althea I was feeling lost,
Lacking in some direction;
Althea told me, upon scrutiny,
My back might need protection.

I told Althea that treachery
Was tearing me limb from limb;
Althea told me, "Now cool down boy -
Settle back, easy, Jim."

"You may be Saturday's child all grown
Moving with a pinch of grace;
You may be a clown in the burying
ground,
Or just another pretty face.
You may be the fate of Ophelia,
Sleeping and perchance to dream:
Honest to the point of recklessness,
Self-centered to the extreme.

Ain't nobody messin' with you but you;
Your friends are getting most
concerned:
Loose with the truth,
Maybe it's your fire,
Baby, don't get burned!"

"When the smoke has cleared," she
said,
That's what she said to me:
"You're gonna want a bed to lay your
head
And a little sympathy.

There are things you can replace,
And others you cannot;
The time has come to weigh those
things:
This space is getting hot -
You know this space is getting hot."

I told Althea,
"I'm a roving sign,
That I was born to be a bachelor."
Althea told me, "OK, that's fine."
So now I'm out trying to catch her

Can't talk to you without talking to me,
We're guilty of the same old thing,
Thinking a lot about less and less,
And forgetting the love we bring.

[Writer(s): Jerry Garcia, Robert Hunter
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Intercession

Our prayer is but to inspire continually the universal church with the spirit of truth, unity, and concord: And grant, that all they who do confess the holy name, may propel the truths of thy holy word, and live in unity and godly love. Assisted by ministers of religion, let the people give thy heavenly grace, that, with meek heart and due reverence, they may hear, and receive the holy path and word, able to serve in holiness and righteousness all the days of our lives:

Defend those of authority in so far as we should be godly and quietly governed, and that they may truly and impartially minister justice, to the reasonable punishment of wickedness and vice, and to the maintenance of virtue.

And we most humbly reflect to consider comfort and succour all of those, which in this transitory life, be found in trouble, sorrow, need, sickness, or any other adversity. And especially we commend this congregation which is here assembled, and we commend those servants departed hence from us, with the sign of faith, and now do rest in the sleep of peace with the joyful voice of a life well-lived. Amen.

[Hymn](#): HL 099 Kingsfold choir

Sermon

The Gospels and wider New Testament, we know, are faith documents of early Christians, and from that post-Easter perspective they are history-like and biography-like but not histories or a biography. I've wondered, is it possible to get behind the Greek New Testament and these faith statements to write a potentially neutral biography of Jesus? The answer should be no, and there is no neutral position, given that even Jesus's own life was a life of faith. But I'm going to break all the rules and have a go.

To do this I'm going to do it like a short story, a novella, where I am forgetting the ifs, the buts and the possibles and probables. I will just say it and go from birth to death. Though he will have been called Yeshua, I'll call him Jesus, the Greek name. So here we go.

According to the Gregorian calendar we use today, Jesus was born in Capernaum in 4 BCE. In worldly terms it was just another birth to just another family. His childhood was short, and was soon learning and working in the building trade alongside his father, especially in the Roman city of Sepphoris that is never mentioned in the New Testament. His father, a proud Jew, hates the fact that he has to work in Sepphoris, and probably never otherwise mentions the place, but it is why Jesus learns Greek as well as Aramaic as his two fluent languages. Jesus takes on that Jewish nationalism, and is an avid reader of the Hebrew scriptures, and is regarded as a bit of an oddball in his excessiveness by the family and others locally, and so Jesus goes off to learn the faith more actively among rabbis. Despite the incoming and outgoing trade routes, with Zoroastrian, Buddhist and Greek influences, Jesus is interested only in the faith of the Jews, in the God who intervenes as recorded, and the God who chooses prophetic individuals.

He becomes, in effect, Rabbi Jesus, if not formally. He goes to Jerusalem around Passover and participates (if at the margins) in the

animal sacrifices. If demons shoot out of humans, they'll occupy unclean animals. But it is in Jerusalem that he is disgusted at the difference between Jewish wealth and poverty, never mind Roman power as at Sepphoris. Jesus is of course active in synagogues. Dissatisfied, he goes looking for those who would under God sweep away the present and bring in justice and peace. Indeed, in a new world, even the animals would join in with the harmony.

He comes across John the Baptist, or John the Nazarene, who like those back in Qumran, preaches a Teacher of Righteousness and a coming end to the world of injustice. He joins John's gang, and absorbs ever more of this messianic approach, along with the rabbis' import of Zoroastrian resurrection beliefs. In the mix too are Buddhist-origin views of compassion and its individualism on top of Judaism's own ethical demands. It is clear that Jesus has his own charismatic skills of communication and faith healing.

Given those skills, John's arrest and execution brings Jesus to the fore. John the Nazarene's fate underlies the necessary suffering servant approach for anyone who is chosen by God to convince God that now is the time to act and sweep away time and bring in the new reality, when the Kingdom of Heaven lowers itself into the plane of the earth and where the asleep in the underworld are woken to come to justice and resurrection. So Jesus forms his own version of John's approach, but where the faith healing comes to the fore, and the Nazarenes undergo change.

He has a long think about this on his own where his mind is affected and the demons are felt to work on him. He comes from that and gathers around him twelve capable people in business or professions to head up those twelve tribes of Israel to be restored at the end time. He preaches that, despite appearances, the wealthy and healthy are not necessarily chosen by God for early entry into the Kingdom, and he goes around the poor of Galilee removing their demons, telling them to sin no more (for to have demons is to sin), and be ready for the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is so close you can almost touch it. The Beatitudes are a summary of various teachings made along the way: they describe the Kingdom to Come. His communication skills involved an ability to connect with people, holding their attention, using his own building trade metaphors as well as agricultural and labouring metaphors in clever story telling. His view on marriage states that people will become angelic, and the married will each be angels in one body. Therefore, no one should divorce, and no man even should look at another woman sinfully.

Now when he was among the rabbis, and training, a certain Mary Magdalene became attached to him, and she was a potential marriage partner for this rabbi. She was always around, and stayed with him. The trouble was, he showed less interest in her than she did with him. Indeed, among the disciples, he had a soft spot for John. In other words, he wasn't sexually attracted to women. He escaped that sin of lust for women. Still, Jesus showed he could organise a brother's wedding, and his mother and Mary Magdalene hoped his own might be not so far off. But Mary was important because she was a woman of means and bankrolled the wanderers. Also she was useful among the uncounted women and children during the big picnics Jesus held among those that came to get healed and hear what was his vision for the near future.

Some thought he was at times on the brink of insanity, and this was part of his charisma. Incredibly intense, he was a theomaniac, but then this was among a country of theomaniacs and within a sect of imminentist beliefs shared fairly widely. In other words, he had cultural support for his egomaniacal beliefs, beliefs that would have intensified as his suffering servant road became ever more obvious, compulsive and final in its testing. To enter the Kingdom the Son of Man had to do the will of the Father; the more the Son did in the way of the Father, the more the Son would be as the Father, and this Son was ever closer to the Father, and surely chosen.

Jesus realised that to go on and on with healing and preaching would mean going stale, and after about a year (not three years) realised that he would have to press the main message into Jerusalem. He knew the important suffering servant role in the Hebrew scriptures along with the messianic purpose, and therefore the extreme lengths necessary to prompt God into taking the final restorative action to bring all injustice to an end. And surely the Romans would oblige, if horribly. He once thought he might have introduced another as a transformed Messiah (he wasn't sure), but in the end he identified that would be that person who, having undergone suffering, would be himself transformed by God into the fully-functioning Messiah.

He has to do it, to go to Jerusalem, where he demonstrates in the Temple against its commercialism and compromise, and the Roman authorities nervously on the edge of empire seek to pick up this leader and cut the head off the Nazarene sect. There was nothing unusual in this: the quicker the Romans acted against such pretenders, the better.

The Romans ruled on this edge of Empire like they did in Britain. If you accepted Roman rule, you could even become powerful yourself and wealthy, join in with the new civilisation. Be like Boudicca in Britain, however, and you'd be smashed to pieces, and the land of your sympathisers razed to the ground. The Jews had periods of quiet and participation, but so many groups there were unreliable and started fighting, so any group risking Roman rule got the full treatment. And the British Celts did not have an ideology so unlike the Romans' stance as did the Jews: British Gods and Roman Gods could intermingle.

Jesus will have spoken to his treasurer Judas about the prophecy of betrayal: Jesus needed to be arrested at the right time to fulfil prophecy. Psalm 41:9 has it "Even my bosom friend in whom I trusted, who ate of my bread, has lifted the heel against me." And then verse 10 says "But you, O Lord, be gracious to me, and raise me up, that I may repay them." So Jesus tells Judas at the last supper: "Go and do what you have to do." Judas was reliable, and money was involved, as Matthew wrote. The bribe is in Zechariah 11:12, and Exodus 21:32 says that the amount of thirty shekels of silver is interpreted as the damages to be paid for the injury to a servant. But the real message was Judas spilling the beans wider afield that Jesus was surely the Messiah. Being Messiah was no offence to Jews, but its translation as kingship was an offence to the Romans, and Judas made sure the Roman authorities could make an easy arrest. Judas couldn't cope with the consequences of the action, and with other disciples out of the prior arrangement, had to leave the Nazarenes.

So Jesus is arrested and passed quickly to the Roman authorities. A signature of a quill pen put Jesus to the death in a manner that demonstrated to the public the need to behave. This was death by torture and also the birds would peck away at the carcass and the bones dumped into a common lime-pit grave so a decent burial was denied. There is no known time or event of the Roman authorities ever giving up an executed body to relatives or the wealthy so that it could undergo a burial according to local religion rites and rituals. Once the bones jumble with others and decompose in the lime, that's it - you'll never identify them and it can stand as a Roman criticism of resurrecting the body. What now would be resurrected of these?

The end-time faith passes to the family, but we also have a certain Saul. Saul as a Jew will have mingled in Jerusalem when Jesus was killed in 29 CE. He paid no attention to any of these torturous executions, other than their demand to behave yourself. Here was a cross-cultural Jew,

who some years later went around synagogues telling authorities to either obey the Law as complete or have a Messiah as claimed by a few excited Jewish worshippers, and therefore he concluded all of the Jews in synagogues should obey the Law. But as a believer in the end-time himself, and also somewhat manic and intense in temperament, he changed over. He still said it is either the Law or the Messiah but flipped sides and promoted the necessity of the Messiah for the end and the inadequacy of the Law. The Law contained but did not remove sin: what removed sin was the dying of one who did not have to die, and his spiritual body having been resurrected. The Jewish language - indeed the once Zoroastrian language - of resurrection is turned around into a new purpose, into the roll-call of authority of visited faith leaders and particularly into a kind of victory over death itself. For one who was demon free and removed them from others had died so that others might live and into eternity. Jesus the transformed resurrected was God's one and only Messiah, said Paul.

But that's not what Jesus preached. Jesus preached not that he was demon-free or sinless or the focus of attention, but that he had to suffer to be a servant to other Jews, so that God would institute the Kingdom. He did not preach Paul's Gentile-inclusive universalism of salvation, although there was an implication that the faithful would eventually enter the Kingdom that had come to earth. And all these are beliefs we simply do not share any more.

There is no three-decker universe, but an expanding red-shift one of 13.5 billion years old. We do not get ill because of demons, and we do not die because we are worn down by demonic activity or because of sin. We die because biology lives and dies. We do not believe in a God intervening to do things we regard as simply active through natural and continuing processes. We do not believe that time will come to an end, except when the universe is so far apart as to make time utterly cold and meaningless - and the earth has about 5 billion years left thanks to the sun's time. Before then we humans will surely go the way of the dinosaurs, and the Hebrew scriptures knew nothing of dinosaurs. We simply don't share Jesus's supernatural views or those of early post-Easter Christians. We might like his ethics, but we, like the rabbis, can argue about them and their situations for applicability. His ego, intensity or megalomania is unattractive, although we can understand that it came through his culture, upbringing, choice of sect and his frustration at what was happening to his own people. Oh, and people have self-consciousness within their brains, and whatever may be ghostly effects in our world - if any - they are not continuous of a

conscious, decision-making person. Once the brain dies, the brain is rapidly unrecoverable, and his brain was eaten by scavenging birds.

This is why I try and tell evangelicals who challenge me. I say to them, "Look, I know as much as you do about this, and it doesn't matter how much you go on it cannot make a difference to me." I am not a Christian because I don't share the beliefs of Jesus or those of the early Christians, nor in any supernaturalism, nor in revised interpretations of his Incarnation or Resurrection, nor, in the end, of the incredibly creative post-evangelical, Radical Orthodox, or non-realist theologies that can somehow retain the narrowness of Christian rituals as adequate gift-exchange rituals. I am not interested either in any emotionally-based 'cults of the individual'. But I do believe in tackling this subject, periodically, and as part of the Unitarian witness, because Christianity remains very powerful politically and we need to challenge and relativise that human power and always demand the necessity of argument and the place of reasonable reasoning.

[Collection](#) Notices

[Hymn](#): NB 013 Stuttgart

Once of earth, and living truly,
Music ended, no more tune:
Body that was animated,
Noble even in its ruin.

Not through further time decaying
Can there simply be an end -
Ashes that someone might measure
In the hollow of a hand.

Not through wandering winds as idle,
Worn away dead dust to fly,
Scattered far, t'was nerve and sinew,
Drifting through an empty sky.

Rather this: the shining highways
Circulating element,
Opened out new routes do beckon
Lead to active settlement!

If about, still, all around us,
Earth with leaves and violets strewn,
Carbon pure will be the fragment:
Heat upon the building stone.

Take, O take this, mighty Gath'rer,
Give again thy servant's soul,
Of the stars from which this wandered -
Exiled and formed long ago.

[Inspired by Aurelius Prudentius Clemens (348 - after 405) Take him, Earth, for
cherishing]

Benediction

Does the candle shed a tear when the flame goes out? Don't be sad, be
mindful. But you cannot travel when the flame is out: travel the path in
the light when alive. Make the best of it while you can.