

# Not Ordinary Church

## ADVENT FOR CREATION AT THE EDGE

Allyson Sawtell, 2024

### NOTE TO PASTORS

We are living, as we always seem to be, in uncertain times:

- At the time of the writing of these materials, the US election season is in full throttle, and by the time you use these resources in Advent, the election will probably be decided and responses/reactions to it will be underway. And who knows what will happen in between!
- Our earth is in a precarious balance. Weather is more extreme, Christian Nationalism grows stronger, wars rage, people are displaced, animal species threatened...the list goes on. What sort of world do our children and grandchildren have the right to expect from us? Something far better than the destruction we're offering them now.

At the same time, we are living, as we always seem to be, in times of hope and of great love:

- Change is happening throughout the world. Good things are happening throughout the world. You can think of your own examples in your own lives and communities.
- In so many places and in so many ways, injustices are made right, new life continues to come into being in our families, our relationships, our churches and we continue to find places of laughter and joy.
- By miracles of medicine and science, illnesses are turned around, and hope flows where there once was none, some animal species are coming back from the brink of extinction...the list goes on.

And you, lucky you, get to help your congregation move through all of this, these times where it feels like we stand on the edge of something frightening and uncertain.

And you, lucky you, get to help your congregation navigate through Advent and the Christmas season with joy, peace, love, and hope.

And you, dear pastors, are just the folks to do this and I thank you from the bottom of my heart for your work and ministry! And I offer you these resources as a way to support you and your congregation's worship life.

These resources do not make up a full service and are not intended to be used as such. Each week consists of a Call to Worship, a Benediction, and a few things to put in between: an Advent or Christ Candle lighting ritual, and some other Readings/Reflections.

The markings ++++++ indicate there are to be spaces between the readings, they are not necessarily to be following one after another. It's where you get to place your parts of the service!

As an organizing theme, I've decided to rename the Advent Candles to reflect our times and our calling in these times: Holy Disruption (Hope), Fear Not (Peace), Resistance (Joy), and Community (Love).

Special note for Week One: The theme is "Holy Disruption," and just for fun, the Benediction that week is a bit of "theater" if you will. The congregation is supposed to disrupt the leader's part a couple of times. Maybe have some folks in the congregation primed to lead the rest of the people in these interruptions. This is not high liturgy! Or great formality. Have some fun with this.

May you find hope and joy and love and peace this season – and some rest! Best to you!

--Allyson Sawtell



## **ADVENT FOR CREATION AT THE EDGE**

### **Week One – Holy Disruption**

#### **Reading – Renaming Advent**

*(Worship leader/Pastor reads at the start of the service, just before Call to Worship)*

The writer of these resources we're using during Advent tells the story of when she was the executive director of a church consulting and resource organization. One of her staff people came to her with a query – one of their clients asked what the names of the Advent candles were.

Without skipping a beat, she told her colleague, “Lucy, Ricky, Fred, and Ethel.”

But then her Inner Grown-Up took over, and she added, “But tell her it's Hope, Peace, Joy and Love.”

Now, years later, she proposes another name change for our traditional Advent images and candles, and we're going to give it a try here at our church! They are: Holy Disruption (Hope), Fear Not (Peace), Resistance (Joy), and Community (Love).

Let's rename the Advent candles. Let's rename Advent.

These are not ordinary times. We stand on the edge of an abyss. We feel the pull of anxiety, despair, division. Yet there are forces pulling us back from the edge – hope, community, solidarity, peace. The love of God, of neighbor, of all Creation. The love we receive and the love we give inexorably pull us away from the abyss.

These are not ordinary times; Business as Usual will no longer suffice. These are times crying out for hope to disrupt the status quo. These are times pleading to hear “fear not”, to live in relationship/community, and to resist the pull of despair.

In that spirit of changing things around and shaking them up, for God's sake and the sake of all Creation, let us begin!

#### **Call to Worship**

Leader: Advent is here! May it interrupt your lives with its good news and its challenges.  
May it call you to join in on this holy disruption, for the sake of Creation.

People: But, but...we were always told it's impolite to interrupt others. Aren't Christians supposed to be polite?

Leader: Since when has God ever pretended to be polite? Birth in a manger was not polite. Death on a cross was not polite. And in between, Jesus spent a good deal of his life not being polite. Jesus spent all of his life in holy disruption – interrupting the status quo and challenging both persons and the powers that be. And Christ’s holy disruption was always from a place of love and justice.

People: So may it be with us! Bless our discomfort, O God, grant us courage and a touch of your hope, and guide our love in paths of justice and healing. This is how we will truly worship you in this season and always!

All: Amen!

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### **Candle-lighting – the Candle of Holy Disruption**

*The Advent Wreath (with Christ Candle) is to be set up in a central location – altar, Communion Table, special table. Beside the Advent Wreath, place a candle that is different from the other candles (of any color, but probably not purple, pink, or white). The purpose of this candle will be explained each week at the start of the Candle-lighting ritual. This candle is to remain unlit throughout Advent and Christmas Eve – remind your candle-lighters that they should not light this one.*

#### Opening words

Candle-lighter:

Here we are, at this time of candle-lighting. This first week of Advent, we will light the candle of Holy Disruption.

We also have another candle here, different from the rest. This candle is a reminder of incompleteness, empty spaces, unfinished business, the work yet to be done in God’s work of Holy Disruption. This candle will remain unlit – even on Christmas Eve (for even Jesus will not complete the work for us). But in the context of God’s love, of community and of rejoicing during this season, we can live with the unlit candle, and the work yet to be done.

#### Reading – Inspired by Mary’s Magnificat from the Gospel of Luke

Reader 1: My soul magnifies the Lord, who has disrupted my life with a terrifyingly glorious message. My spirit rejoices, for God has powered on through my own powerlessness.

Reader 2: For the Holy One has propelled me from the margins and into the centrality of good news. God has proclaimed my worthiness and blessedness, when others would deny it.

Reader 1: May our souls magnify the Lord, who has promised to disrupt our lives with hope, to turn around injustice and disempowerment, hate and greed.

Reader 2: May our souls magnify the Lord, for through God’s embodiment of life and promise, hope breaks in. God continues to make a way in the wilderness, and power out of powerlessness.

Readers 1 & 2: And all generations will be blessed!

*The Advent Candle is lit*

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**Benediction**

Leader: Now, my friends go –

People (interrupting) – So it’s OK for us to interrupt some things, like injustice, right?

Leader: Well, yes. Now, my friends, as you leave –

People (still interrupting) – But it’s got to be done in love, right?

Leader: Absolutely. Now, as I was saying –

People – OK, we got it. God help us to turn injustice and hate around, to disrupt hopelessness and despair. God help us! And together we can help to turn your world around, O God.

Leader: And together, we will go out in peace and be led forth with hope.

All: Amen and Amen!!

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**For the Pastor/Worship planning team:**

Here are some additional background materials for the First Week of Advent – you can read these during your service, incorporate bits into your sermon, share in your worship committee meeting, place as a meditation in your bulletin, or use it for your own personal reflection.

We Stand at the Edge

*(Excerpted from Creation at the Edge – Prayers and Readings for Election Season 2024)*

It is said that when people stand at the edge of things – the rim of the Grand Canyon, for example, or the top of a tall, tall building, many sometimes experience a pull from the depths, a terror that holds all attention; what researchers have come to label “the call of the void.”

Even as hardly anyone actually physically leaps into that void, the call is still there for many of us many times. Even if we are, in reality, safely on solid ground, or behind strong panes of glass. Standing at the edge. The call of the void. That yawning abyss of hopelessness, or fear, or non-constructive rage.

In this season of continuing injustice, of white supremacy, violence perpetrated on people, groups and planet, we stand at the edge.

In this season of hurricanes, wildfires, floods, droughts, poisoned air and water, poisoned souls, we stand at the edge.

As community splinters under the onslaught of runaway individualism, greed, division, and hate (splinters but does not shatter), we stand at the edge.

As our children and grandchildren of ALL species watch us and ask us “Why?”, we stand at the edge.

It will take a huge community effort, splintered though we may be, to pull ourselves back from the edge. To hold each other until the trembling stops and we can lead each other back to paths that are life-giving.

And it will take a huge community effort to realize that this dream of holding, healing, leading, can be a reality for us. For our children and our grandchildren. Of all species.

This Advent, we stand at the edge: the edges of hope/despair, of peace/violence, of joy/lament, and love/isolation.

### Mary's Song (Luke)

Look at Mary's song as a devotional exercise – not an academic study (though, for many, an academic study *is* a devotional exercise). We need to hear her song. Enter into it. Let it speak to us now. Here.

The writer of the Gospel of Luke placed this song on Mary's lips – not Joseph's, not Jesus', not the Magi's. Certainly not Herod. On Mary's lips, in a time of persecution, fear, Empire, powerlessness and uncertainty. And since the Gospel of Luke was written towards the end of the first century, the song resonated with the people at that time, as well – a people experiencing persecution, fear, Empire, powerlessness and uncertainty. (OK, so there was a little bit of academics here!)

Mary's song echoed Hannah's prayer from 1 Samuel in the Hebrew Scriptures, her prayer of thanksgiving.

Mary's song is a song rooted, then, in her history and her community. One that spoke to her situation, her life. And with all its disruptive contents, one that pointed with hope to an unfolding future.

Where might her song be sung in this time and this place, in our world?



## ADVENT FOR CREATION AT THE EDGE

### Week Two – Fear Not

#### Call to Worship

Leader: Fear not, dear friends! Blessed are you! Yes you, over there in the pew, whose mind just wandered off, and you over there wondering perhaps why you are here, and you, right there, struggling to make sense of so many things. Blessed are you!

People: Sort of a strange welcoming on a Sunday morning – “fear not”! We like the “blessed are you!” part, though.

Leader: Blessed are you! Beloved are you! We are all held in community and nourished by our connectedness with all life, here and now, and through time and space. And we are gathered here to remind ourselves of that connection, and to celebrate its power. So fear not!

People: Alright! Amen!

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**Readings** *(for use as you see fit throughout your service of worship, and **not** all in one spot.*

#### Scripture reference – Luke 1:26-30

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. And he came to her and said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.”

#### The Qualifier Angel

Be not afraid.

...Well, be afraid, sometimes, but don’t act on it.

Well, act on it, sometimes, but in a way that builds up,

and if you need to protect yourself, then do so, but ask yourself, do I really need to do so? And at what cost to others?

Fear not.

...Well, yes, sometimes.

It’s prudent to fear.

Live not from a place of fear, but live in the face of your fear.

Fear not.

I trust this is all clear?

## Angels Always Say

Angels always say “Fear not,” when maybe they should explain themselves a bit more clearly. “OK, feel afraid. Feel scared you-know-whatless! That’s a pretty healthy response, don’t you think?”

And, they might add, “But do not *be* fear itself, cutting off hope and possibilities. Feel afraid, *and* don’t give into the pull of the yawning abyss of terror, panic, hate, despair.”

Maybe the angels need to say, “Yes, go ahead and feel afraid. This world-changing is pretty powerful stuff. *And* God is with you. Blessed are you!”

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## Candle-Lighting – the Candle of Fear Not

*The Advent Wreath (with Christ Candle) is to be set up in a central location – altar, Communion Table, special table. Beside the Advent Wreath, place a candle that is different from the other candles (of any color, but probably not purple, pink, or white). The purpose of this candle will be explained each week at the start of the Candle-lighting ritual. This candle is to remain unlit throughout Advent and Christmas Eve – remind your candle-lighters that they should not light this one.*

### Opening words

Candle-lighter:

Here we are, at this time of candle-lighting. This second week of Advent, we will light the candle of Fear Not.

We also have another candle here, different from the rest. This candle is a reminder of incompleteness, empty spaces, unfinished business, the work yet to be done in helping all Creation to fear not. To help all Creation live in peace. This candle will remain unlit – even on Christmas Eve (for even Jesus will not complete the work for us). But in the context of God’s love, of community and of rejoicing during this season, we can live with the unlit candle, and the work yet to be done.

### Reading – Fear Not

What kind of a “fear not” do we need?

For those who struggle, alone, isolated, wordless and speechless.

For those whose questions go unanswered, who are invisible.

For those who shiver in the night on the concrete.

For those who cover their bruises, trapped, held motionless by fear.

What kind of a “fear not” do we need?

For those whose future is ripped away by war, by diagnosis, by poisoned air and water.

For those who face erasure, extinction.

What kind of a “fear not” do we need?

Perhaps one we say to each other, holding each other’s fear in our hands.

Perhaps one we say with our bodies, on the line, in the street, in an embrace.

Yet the angels still spoke, still speak.

Do I believe in angels? I don’t know. But I believe in “fear not.”



Reflection and Time of Silence

What “fear not” do you proclaim?

What “fear not” do you need to hear?

What “fear not” could you embody for our community and the world?

*(Have paper and pencils on hand for people to write as they choose. They can take home what they've written and reflect on it during the rest of Advent. And maybe even talk about it during your coffee hour after services!)*

*The Advent Candle is lit*

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**Benediction**

Fear not, dear friends! God is with you.

Yes, you,

as you question and struggle;

as you dream and act;

as you are frightened or curious or sad or angry;

as you embark on a new and sometimes frightening journey;

as you try to make “good trouble” in the world;

as you grieve our planet’s pain – and your own pain – and wonder what will come of it all.

Do not be consumed by fear, for you do not take your journeys alone, dear friends. Fear not!

And may you truly depart in peace!



## ADVENT FOR CREATION AT THE EDGE

### Week 3 – Resistance

#### Call to Worship

Leader: Oh beloved Advent people, welcome to this season of joy!

People: Have you read the headlines recently...

Leader: Oh beloved Advent people, joy is real, *and* our world's suffering is real. Neither negates the other. But, Oh beloved Advent people, as we work to help birth God's new world of true justice, healing and love into being, let us continue to rejoice. For joy is an act of resistance against all that would destroy and disempower.

People: God, pour out your hope, uphold us with a peace beyond human understanding, so that we can engage in this work in a spirit of joy.

Leader: Together, let us work and wonder, cry out and celebrate, restore and rejoice!

People: Joy to the world! Thanks be to God!

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**Readings** *(for use as you see fit throughout your service of worship, and **not** all in one spot.*

#### **Reflections on Luke 2:8-10**

“In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people...’”

Those danged angels again, who always have to reassure us whenever they show up, because they are so terrifying. Loud noises, bright lights, heavenly, huge beings in the sky – the picture painted in Luke's Gospel. Who knows what was real. But the frightening piece was not just the dramatic pyrotechnics, but the message that followed: “Tidings of great joy” for unto this world and these powerless people, was born the hope and possibility of change and justice and peace and a reversal of oppressive systems and imperial devastation. Joy!

#### **Push Back**

*The Spirit of God has filled the universe with possibilities and therefore, from the very heart of things, something new can always emerge. (Pope Francis, Laudato Si')*

Let your hands shake and your heart break – but speak up

Let your mind reel and your soul feel – now act up

Push back – resist the pull of despair

Push back – resist the comforting call of privilege, or Business as Usual, denial, or status quo.

Push back – resist the temptation to let fear define who you are and how you can act  
Push back – resist being silenced by the powers that be  
Push back – embrace joy!

Resist and reach out. You are not alone. The world is full of possibilities and connectedness. The path is all too often long, rough, and frightening – but joy can lead your steps. Resist, and dare to celebrate the promise of this season, tidings of great joy. For unto us is born hope, and the possibility of change. Unto us is born the promise that love overcomes hate and life overcomes death.

### **The Whole Loaf**

*“Joy is not made to be a crumb” (line taken from Mary Oliver, “Don’t Hesitate”)*

Joy is bread to feed us.

Love is drink poured out for us.

Gratitude the Amen to this sacrament of wonder that is our life.

Joy is the whole loaf, meant to be shared.

Love is the drink that we often spill clumsily but if we’re lucky there’s someone there to help us clean it up, refill the cup, and join us in the toast.

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### **Candle-Lighting – the Candle of Resistance**

*The Advent Wreath (with Christ Candle) is to be set up in a central location – altar, Communion Table, special table. Beside the Advent Wreath, place a candle that is different from the other candles (of any color, but probably not purple, pink, or white). The purpose of this candle will be explained each week at the start of the Candle-lighting ritual. This candle is to remain unlit throughout Advent and Christmas Eve – remind your candle-lighters that they should not light this one.*

#### Opening words

Candle-lighter:

Here we are, at this time of candle-lighting. This third week of Advent, we will light the candle of Resistance.

We also have another candle here, different from the rest. This candle is a reminder of incompleteness, empty spaces, unfinished business, the work yet to be done in helping all Creation to resist and push back against fear, apathy, despair. To help all Creation rejoice, even in the face of these hard, hard times. This candle will remain unlit – even on Christmas Eve (for even Jesus will not complete the work for us). But in the context of God’s love, of community and of rejoicing during this season, we can live with the unlit candle, and the work yet to be done.

Reader 1: It can be hard to embrace hope because hopes can be dashed. It can be difficult to hold peace, because peace seems so tenuous. It can feel nearly impossible sometimes to embrace joy, because lament is still out there, waiting.

Reader 2: Joy is an act of resistance. It shows we still have our humanity (especially when we can laugh at ourselves), that fear and despair have not taken over.

Reader 1: Resist the powers that would send you spiraling into despair, the powers that would fill your fears, manipulate your grief, attempt to turn you into a hater of “those others”.

Reader 2: Resist, by grounding yourself in joy this season. Not denial, giddiness, compulsory good cheer, or even happiness, but joy.

Reader 1: Joy is a deep well from which you can pull refreshing and life-giving waters. Joy is profound reaching out in connection with others – people, critters, arts, nature.

Reader 2: Very few can engage in resistance by themselves, as a solitary act. Some can, but most of us need others. We need those danged angels around us – our traditions, our ancestors in actuality and in faith, and our communities here and now. Through them, we can each bring tidings of great joy to each other and to the world.

Reader 1: Let us be a people of resistance! Let us be a people of joy!

*The Advent Candle is lit*

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**Benediction** (*Read by pastor/worship leader*)

Let us find – or make – occasions for joy.

Through our joy, we resist the pull of despair that would disempower us.

In the midst of all the hard work there is to do, there is yet so, so much to celebrate in God’s good Creation.

Rejoice and be glad and be led forth in joy!



## **ADVENT FOR CREATION AT THE EDGE**

### **Week Four – Community**

#### **Call to Worship**

Leader: Come, O people of faith and of questions, come, let us gather here to celebrate and to explore together what it means to be a people of hope and joy.

People: We are gathered here to learn from each other, to teach each other, to be inspired by God's Spirit, to discern where our faith might take us. And to celebrate as we do so!

Leader: Come, O justice-seekers and peace-makers, let us gather here to celebrate and to respond to God's call to change the world!

People: Wait, what? Us? Change the world??

Leader: Come, O hesitant, courageous, and beloved people! Let's gather here to celebrate, to support one another in this good work, and to hold each other up. Does that sound better?

People: OK, we can do that! Hold us, O God, as we seek to hold each other in community, and then to go out and actively love your world.

Leader: Come, O people of hope and of wonder, let us gather here to celebrate this season of Jesus' birth and its promise of new life. Let us celebrate God's gift of community here and within the whole Web of Life. Now and always.

People: Let the party begin! Amen and amen!

#### **Reading – inspired by Mary's Magnificat**

Reader 1: My soul magnifies God, and my spirit rejoices in the beloved connectedness of all life, of love that permeates the universe and reaches down into our very cells.

Reader 2: My soul magnifies God and my spirit rejoices in love that saves us.

Love holds us and lifts us up.

Fear not!

Reader 1: My imperfect, flawed, and loveable soul magnifies God, and my spirit cries out with joy! For each person who holds me up, and whom I hold up in turn, each step we take together in the work for justice; all the weeping we share together in grief for our torn planet; in those places, God's love is embodied, and God's love is shared.

Blessed are you!

Reader 2: My soul cries out and dares to believe that a changed world is possible. That kingdoms of greed and white supremacy can be turned on their heads and sent away empty. That wildfires can slow down, air is breathable, the killing of all innocents stops, the water clears, coral reefs make a comeback, all people can love whom they love, and all people can claim their own precious selves as true and real.

My soul cries out and my body takes a deep breath. My spirit rejoices in love that saves us!

### **Candle-lighting – the Candle of Community**

*The Advent Wreath (with Christ Candle) is to be set up in a central location – altar, Communion Table, special table. Beside the Advent Wreath, place a candle that is different from the other candles (of any color, but probably not purple, pink, or white). The purpose of this candle will be explained each week at the start of the Candle-lighting ritual. This candle is to remain unlit throughout Advent and Christmas Eve – remind your candle-lighters that they should not light this one.*

#### Opening words

Candle-lighter:

Here we are, at this time of candle-lighting. This fourth week of Advent, we will light the candle of Community.

We also have another candle here, different from the rest. This candle is a reminder of incompleteness, empty spaces, unfinished business, the work yet to be done in creating and sustaining community and in embodying love in and for God's world. To recognize and live by our connectedness to all life. This candle will remain unlit – even on Christmas Eve (for even Jesus will not complete the work for us). But in the context of God's love, of community and of rejoicing during this season, we can live with the unlit candle, and the work yet to be done.

Reader 1: What an interesting community gathered at the manger, in the classic Christmas scene.

You know, the one that combines a couple of the Gospel accounts into one story.

Reader 2: What a strange community gathered at the manger!

- Mary, who brought forth life and who, with Joseph, raised, nurtured, loved and taught Jesus compassion and prophetic action. Who taught Jesus to resist and fight those individuals and systems that would oppress and destroy. And who changed his swaddling cloths, and taught him to walk. And fed his body and spirit.
- The Magi, outsiders who came to worship and were not turned away. Powerful people, whose own privilege did not prevent them from searching for truth from others, or from kneeling before that which was greater than they.

Reader 1: What an interesting community gathered at the manger!

- The Shepherds, who protected the vulnerable in their care at the risk of their own wellbeing, who together gathered courage to seek out, engage with, and proclaim the Good News of new life.
- The angels, those danged angels, who keep showing up and terrifying us with their glory and message, and who remind us that we are part of something greater than our own fears. Who dare us to celebrate and rejoice with them.

- The critters who shared their home with the newborn Jesus. It was a manger, after all. There *were* critters. Animals gathered and giving warmth.

There is a community gathered at the manger, a wailing infant, singing angels, the animals and the people. Regular, everyday people responding to the call to do extraordinary things.

Shall we find ourselves, there, too? In community? Called to do extraordinary things like love the world, and rejoice? Shall we “go even unto Bethlehem”, or right down the street, or right here and right now, in these pews? Shall we find ourselves in the glorious Christmas story of hope and hard work, of love and justice?

*The Candle of Community is lit.*

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**Benediction**

Reader 1: There is a community gathered in the story we hold.

Reader 2: A story of connectedness, of interdependency that is life-giving and life-sustaining.

Reader 1: A story that pushes us beyond our fears. That dares us to embrace hope and embody deep joy.

Reader 2: There is a community gathered in the story we hold.

Reader 1: A story of newborn in a manger, and “tidings of great joy!” And a people yearning to receive and understand this good news.

Reader 2: It’s a story of a community gathered here in this place on this day. A community that gathers around the Table for a common holy meal. A community that gathers around signs and chants and marches and hard work for justice and solidarity.

Reader 1: A community that gathers around tears, laughter, farewells and new life.

Reader 2: A community greater than any one of us, but made better by each one of us.

Reader 1: As we have gathered, and now disperse, know you are held in love, and you are not alone. And that together, we can spread those ancient tidings of great joy!

All: Amen!



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