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Celebrating Questions, Courage, and Community: Advent and Christmas Eve

A collection of worship resources

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Note to Pastors and Worship Leaders

Advent is a time of yearning, expectation, hope and joy. The Church is a place where all of that comes together, where we can lament and laugh, question and celebrate, and sometimes do that all at once. We gather in community to celebrate and explore the ageless story of the presence of God in our world, the promise that Christ has brought of life and love, justice and peace.

This is a collection of a variety of original worship resources. Most of them are not assigned to any one particular week in Advent – use them wherever you think they would fit best in your service. Because some of the prayers and readings are long, they would work best being read by one or two worship leaders, instead of the whole congregation. They can be used as a reflection piece, or during your Advent Candle Lighting ritual, or simply as a reading paired with scripture. In fact, some of the readings emerged out of my reactions and reflections around certain scriptural passages.

Bless you in your good work. May your Advent and Christmas season be one of hope and joy!

CALLS TO WORSHIP

Joy Be With You

Leader: Joy be with you!

People: And also with you!

Leader: Rejoice! Even as we've read the headlines and seen all the bad news and know those are real. Yet so also is joy! Joy be with you!

People: And also with you!

Leader: Rejoice! We have each other.
We are held by God: a force of love that is greater than all the grim news, all the deep loss, all the fear that we carry. Even now, joy pushes through, born in us and through us. Joy be with you!

ALL: Joy be with you and all Creation! Rejoice! Amen!

Sleep in Heavenly Peace

Leader: "Sleep in heavenly peace," the song says.

People: Who can sleep at a time like this, when there seems to be very little peace?

Leader: "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you," Christ said.

People: We need more of that good peace, O God!

Leader: "Pray and work – God won't put it in your lap," Fannie Lou Hamer said.

People: In this season of peace, God, help us work with you, and be peacemakers, in whatever way we can, as individuals and as a community.

All: May we participate in bringing peace on Earth! Amen!

Holding it All – Christmas Eve

Leader: Hearts burst open with gratitude! Hearts leap with joy!
Hearts fling wide the doors, and love enters in.
Welcome to Christmas Eve!

People: With joy and gratitude, we're ready to celebrate!

Leader: Also with our unanswered questions, our silent pain, our unspoken fears,
We gather here, and Christmas Eve holds it all.

People: We give thanks for the One that holds it all with us. So we celebrate!

Leader: This is a time of wonder and wondering, quiet and chaos, candlelight and soft darkness.

People: We are here, holding it all and ready to celebrate!

ALL: Thanks be to God! Amen!

READINGS

Note: These may be used paired with your Scripture readings, or as part of your Advent candle lighting ritual, or even in your sermon or time for reflection.

A Psalmful of Questions (In response to the opening lines of Isaiah 64)

Oh! That you would come down from the heavens
and squash – with a satisfying crunch – our enemies, like so many ugly, repulsive bugs!

But wait –
What if my enemies are someone else's friends?
What if *I'm* someone else's enemy?
And what is so repulsive about small, ugly bugs anyway? Don't they deserve to live, too?

Oh! That you would come down and squash…
Our fears?
Our anger?
Our despair?

But wait –
Even our fear, anger and despair can teach us something, can't they?

Oh! That you would come down…

But wait –
Come down from where?
Aren't you actually here already in us, among us, between us? In your good Creation?
We breathe in your presence, as life-giving as oxygen.
You soak into our skin like the warmth of the sun or the cool nourishing rain.

Oh! Oh.

Perhaps our prayer is simply
Oh! But wait….

Beloved, Let Us Love One Another

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God.
That vast connectedness within the universe that holds us and tells us we are not alone –
Stardust and Earthdust,
Time and space,
Molecules and atoms,
People and planet,
Creatures great and small,
Oceans and mud puddles,
Trees and even bindweed,
All in their own way, holding the sacred (even the bindweed)

O mysterious power that is connection
That is love
That is God,
Calls to us, "Oh beloved, love one another!"

Beloved, beloved, love is the power that holds us.
Love is the power that we ourselves –
Like the mountains, mud puddles and bindweed – can hold.

Oh, beloved, let us love one another –
You. Me. Them.
Mountains and ant hills
All.

Beloved, let us love.

Comfort, Comfort, My People!

Comfort, comfort, my people
When the tears won't stop, and the hole in your heart made by loss just keeps growing,
Comfort, comfort.

When the tears won't start, and numbness just settles in,
Comfort, comfort.

When rage boils and seethes, and your own helplessness claws at your soul as the injustices just don't stop,
Comfort, comfort.

When fear ceases in its wisdom, and instead undermines your efforts,
Comfort, comfort.

Speak tenderly to yourself and each other.

Comfort is not a denial. It is a moment of rest and breath.

A moment of being held
by another
by your dreams
by your power
by the hand of God.

Nestle in that space for a time.

Comfort, comfort, my people.

For God So Loved the World

For God so loved the world,
For God so loved the cosmos,
For God so loved all Creation,

That God does what God has always done –
Continue to lead us out of bondage and towards liberation
Out of estrangement towards home,
Out of the wilderness of our own isolation, towards community and interdependence.

God calls us back to the Web of Life.

For God so loves the world.

Gabriel's Second Annunciation *(Or, Oh yeah, there's something we forgot to tell you)*

Hail Mary, full of grace! The Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women.
And by the way, you're gonna get pregnant.
Not an ideal situation, granted.
There will be shame.
Your fiancé will consider leaving you, but changes his mind (which is a good thing)
And you get to ride a donkey on rough roads for many miles while you're in labor.
Oh, and you have the baby in a barn.
With a whole lot of animals around you (that last part isn't too bad, right?)

Oh, and here's the tricky part:
He will be different.
He will have powerful enemies, and questionable friends.
He will defy the empire and call out the religious authorities
He will, though, bring hope to those put down and left out.
And preach a lot about love.
And will live a lot of love. And that will confuse the daylights out of people.

And, well, yes, he will be executed by the government.
And you watch the whole thing.
You stayed with your son, with your love and presence.
But he died. And all sorts of weird things happened after that.
But, hey, blessed are you among women!

Hello, Mary? Are you still full of grace?
When you rejoiced even in the face of the vast unknowns of birth and death and the future?
When you loved in the face of loss?
When you moved through it all, clinging to the hands of those you loved: your community, your God?
That would be a "yes", I think.

May your grace-filled presence empower us, comfort us, and guide us all.
Amen!

Hope

During a time of drought,
We watch with hope the rain clouds in the western sky, slowly moving our way.
Huge, dark, and beautiful.
May they break open and shower this parched earth!
May it be this time, this place!
Snow on the mountains, rain on the dry earth, reservoirs replenished!

Hope is not always reflected in the bright, warm sun.
Hope is also a dark and heavy cloud, so full of promise and life.

Hope is the slow movement towards replenishment, reparation, restoration.

We can only watch the cloud.

But, together, we get to *be* that move towards replenishment, reparation, restoration.

Together, if we dare, we can embody hope.

Here. Now.

Mary's Eventual Magnificat

What you heard was joyful proclamation!

What came before were questions.

My soul (would eventually) glorify God.

But first, my soul was perplexed.

My soul asked the question "How can this be?"

My soul heard "fear not."
(Which, given the circumstances, was good to hear.)

My soul heard "blessed are you."
(Bestowed by the one exempt from morning sickness, shame, and all that followed.)

Then my soul remembered the ancestors, the journeys and the struggles, the Holy Presence and Promise, and my soul saw its place in the procession. And rejoiced.

My soul, yes, finally, rejoiced in God's strange reassurances.

My soul, yes, finally, rejoiced in the God of not-so-easy-answers,
The God of rock solid exhortations to courage, the God who led the ancestors through the unknown, who topples the powerful and uplifts those at the edge and over the edge.

The God who embodies and lives "fear not."

My soul, yes, finally, rejoices!

Masked Merriment

The first Christmas Eve after the Pandemic, the congregation gathered for its traditional candlelight Christmas Eve service.

They sang – masked

They prayed – masked

They listened – masked – to the timeless stories of angels and shepherds, mangers and babies.

Then, as they'd always done in years past, they formed a large circle in the sanctuary, lit their candles, and sang "Silent Night" (masked), holding their lights up high.

As the final notes drifted away, the congregation stood in thoughtful silence, as they all tried to figure out how – masked – they would blow out their candles.

More silence.

Then laughter. Long and loud laughter.

Perhaps the best benediction ever for Christmas Eve!

Of Magpies and Peace

Peace can be made in those little places and common events:
The safe spaces we make for people and creatures;
The words we say in support and defense of our neighbors;
The silence we keep as we listen;
The actions we take for justice;
The way we hold each other:
The ordinary and the common.

Like the magpies, constructing their amazing domed nests with
Bits and pieces of ordinary twigs and sticks;
grass and animal fur; mud and even manure.
That is the way they build their home.

Doves – those designer pigeons – are lovely.
They certainly have their place in peace lore.

But the magpies – oh, those cheeky magpies!
They just keep collecting ordinary bits and pieces of common twigs and mud,
Constructing something incredible and strong.

Peace can be made in little bits and pieces of the ordinary.

Blessed are the peacemakers, creating peace in bits and pieces
of common materials – even manure.
Together, building a home:
A place to shelter, grow and eventually to fly out of,
Constantly searching, sometimes finding, always building.

Peace. Peace. Peace on Earth.

Those Who Love

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God.
Those who love, know God.

Yes,
And those who love know also
Pain and sorrow
Tears and loneliness
Yes,
And those who love know also
Hope and community
And joy.

They welcome diversity
They dance in the rainbow
They embrace air and starlight waters and warmth
And each other.
They weep together, and argue, and laugh and work
And they hold each other

And know the heart of God.

PRAYERS

Create in Me a Fierce Heart

(A reading in four parts. It could be done with two or four readers, or one section each week for four weeks)

Create in me a fierce heart, O Holy One:
Fit enough for loving
Expansive enough for welcoming
Courageous enough for listening
Stubborn enough for justice
Large enough for kinship
Silly enough for laughter
Strong enough for hope
Create in me a fierce heart, O Holy One.

Create in me a fierce heart, O Holy One:
A strong will to stay in the fray
A courageous will to dream, and believe in possibilities
A stubborn will to keep working towards those possibilities
An absurdly hopeful will that can move through despair, carry its scars, and keep on going.
Create in me a fierce heart, O Holy One.

Create in me a fierce heart, O Holy One:
A loud, powerful, strong will to be heard,
to voice lament,
to call out injustice,
to sing of love and hope and joy.
A loud voice to say "yes!" to all that is life-giving
To push our "no!" into halls of greed, hate, and Business as Usual.
And to laugh raucously with joy.
Create in me a fierce heart, O Holy One.

Create in me a fierce heart, O Holy One:
Not a perfect one,
Not one that never tires for a time, or never trembles on occasion,
But one akin to yours – fierce and strong-willed in your love for all Creation.
Create in me a fierce heart, O Holy One!

Make Us Angels!

Make us angels, O God!

Not the cherubic halo-type of angels,
But the ones that stand in the night and proclaim, "We bring you tidings of great joy!"
The ones that empower others to go forth in courageous joy towards the unknown.

Make us angels, O God!
Strong enough to withstand others' fears, and our own
Courageous enough so that by our lives, we can proclaim good news of great joy.

For we are held by a love that overcomes all and cradles all.

A love that calls us forth to stand even in the night.

Make us angels, O God! Amen!

BENEDICTIONS

Doing Hope

Hope is in our doing and our working.
Hope is in our dreaming.
Hope is in our connection with each other and all Creation.
Hope is us – together – reaching out and welcoming in

Hope is not about the outcome, but about the vision and the work.

Keep on! Keep going! Keep breathing!

Hope in yourself, in others, in the God who holds us all.

Go out in hope, be led forth with love, and rejoice!

Let us love one another

Beloved, let us love one another.
Let us hope with one another.
Together, let us work for peace.
Together, let us rejoice with one another.

In these hard times, our hearts my break but they do not shatter into a million irretrievable pieces. Despair may leave its mark but does not destroy us.

For love is the final word. Love triumphs!

These promises of God –
Born in a manger on a cold winter night, surrounded by creatures and people alike –

These promises of God –
Held in the heart of that community so long ago –
Are born again and again in us, through us, among us, and beyond us.

Thanks be to God!

Beloved, let us love one another!

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