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Not Ordinary Church

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Advent for Ordinary People in Not Ordinary Times

Allyson Sawtell 2023

Notes to Pastors and Worship Leaders Advent and Christmas Eve materials

Introduction to the Resources

Blessings on you this Advent season! It is my hope these Advent and Christmas Eve resources will be helpful for you and your congregation as you move through this time of excitement, anticipation, waiting and wonder.

The theme for these resources centers on the ordinary people of the Bible who were part of the Christmas Story, and as such, helped turn the world around. It affirms that we as well, ordinary people in “not ordinary” times and powerless as we might feel, can yet be part of God’s world-changing, world-creating new story. Each week we will look at the ordinary folks who make up the Biblical narrative of Christmas, and know that we are not alone in our work.

The resources presuppose that “it’s really hard out there.” Climate change, divisiveness, violence, fear, injustice, poverty...the list goes on. You know all this. We are not living in ordinary times; we are living in crisis times. Business as Usual no longer suffices. On top of that, you almost certainly have folks in your congregation going through their own personal struggles and heartache, as well. As pastors you know how hard it can be to proclaim good news in the face of all that. Yet Advent is all about proclaiming good news and hope in the midst of really, really hard times. So, bless you for that work you do to try to proclaim good news in all seasons!

The resources also make the proclamation that there is space for joy and celebration. There is yet so much goodness and beauty in God’s good creation including in our own beloved communities, our churches. We can be active participants in building up the new world that Christ’s birth heralds. Even we, who are simply ordinary people, can do this work. Together.

General Notes and Suggestions about the Liturgies

These pieces were written to be added to the already-existing format that you will have created for your services during Advent and on Christmas Eve. They do not make up the entirety of your worship service.

The resources consist of several parts:

- A Scripture Reading and a Meditation that set the framework and tone for the liturgies, based on the traditional themes for Advent: Hope, Peace, Joy, Love. **It is important to include these readings and meditation pieces at the very start of your service.**
- There is no opening scripture reading paired with the Meditation for the Christmas Eve service; that comes during the Lighting of the Christ Candle piece.
- A Call to Worship

- A ritual for the Lighting of the Advent Candle(s)
- A short Advent Hymn that changes somewhat each week to match each week's theme. The Christmas Eve Hymn, following the same tune, ties up the themes of the last four weeks. This hymn will be sung by the congregation following the lighting of the Advent or Christ candles.
- Benediction

The service framework will probably be somewhat different than your usual service order:

- The Scripture reading and the Meditation need to go at the *start* of the service, *before* the Call to Worship.
- Because there is a lot of text, it is preferable that the Meditation reading done by one or two leaders, with the words in the bulletin.

Read over the services well in advance; there are notes in some of the services with suggestions on how to prepare in advance. Don't count on looking through these materials the night before you'll be using them. ☺ **Especially note Week 4, where you will be asking the congregation ahead of time to bring in quotes about love to use in the service.**

The lines in **bold-faced red** are for instruction only, and are not to be printed in the bulletin.

An option for setting up the candle-lighting space

To keep Advent and Christmas in the context of our world here and now, place some newspaper clippings around the space where Advent/Christ candles will be lit. (You can tell I'm old school – print newspapers! You may just want to print off online headlines if no one in your congregation gets print newspapers anymore.) In the midst of those clippings will go the symbols that people bring forward each week (see *Candle-lighting ritual* below). The “clippings” can include upbeat news as well as the hard stuff.

Because there will be newspaper clippings on the table with the Advent Wreath, it's advisable, if possible, that you use tall pillar candles instead of taper candles, because tapers tend to drip wax more.

Advent Candle-lighting ritual

If possible, have the candle-lighters be different each week. Have a least two candle lighters each week. Sometimes the candle-lighters are families (as defined by the families themselves), or members of a group (the youth group, the choir, the Church Council), or individual people.

It is essential that the candle-lighters are chosen well in advance, and not Sunday morning! This is because they are to think of something that symbolizes the theme for that day – hope, or peace, or joy, or love. They are to bring that symbol with them on the Sunday they are lighting their particular candle (a picture or an object or even a word written on paper). They may take their symbols home with them after the service.

At the start of the Candle-lighting, they will say *a few brief* words about why they chose that particular symbol. Then they will enter into the reading and candle-lighting.

I wish you well during your Advent and Christmas journey. Let me know how the service worked for your church!

May the blessings, good work, and joy of Advent and Christmas be with you!

And may you get some good rest and relaxation on December 26!

Advent for Ordinary People in Not Ordinary Times

Week One – Hope

Scripture – Luke 1:46-55 (Mary's *Magnificat*)

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Meditation – *Hope, and Ordinary Folks*

Reader 1: The Bible is full of ordinary folks. In fact, that's who mostly makes up our extraordinary holy scripture. Ordinary people trying simply to live, and to figure it all out, in the midst of marginalization, fear, oppression, uncertainty...of Empire. But also in the midst of hope and wonder and love and beauty, as well. This Advent, we ordinary people, who are trying to figure it all out, will hear their stories.

Reader 2: We begin with Mary, the mother of Jesus: An ordinary young woman. She and her community are poor, and marginalized by those in power.

Reader 1: This is Mary: Visited by an angel, questioning the angel's news that she will bear a son. Eventually, then, agreeing to participate, and to carry a heavy uncertainty into an uncharted, unknown future. And after all that, she sings her song of praise and hope.

Reader 2: This is Mary: Claiming the possibilities of a new beloved community, one where oppression and violence are destroyed. Embodying hope in her womb and in her saying "Yes!" to God's call. Embodying hope and courage as she proclaims a new Beloved Community in the face of old Empire.

Reader 1: Through this ordinary person called Mary, God is doing nothing short of turning the world around! And God is calling to *us*, now, to join in continuing to turn the world around towards love, justice and joy.

Reader 2: Like Mary, we are looking into the face of the unknown. All of us have questions as we face the unknown. So did Mary. And she chose, eventually, to respond with joy and hope. Shall we do likewise?

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Call to Worship

Leader: Welcome to Advent! Listen up! God calls us, God calls us, *God calls us!*

God calls us

to be hope-filled people all the time, even when times are hopeless.

to be peace-making people even in soul-breaking times

to be joyous creatures even in a devastated creation

God calls us

to be lovers: deeply, courageously, and joyfully loving,

as we challenge unrelenting hate, abuse, and destruction.

People: Well. That sounds great, God, it really does.

But do you have any idea how hard this is????

[Silence while we think about this]

Leader: And....

People: Alright, God, maybe you do.

Leader: Might we, with Mary give it our best try, and proclaim that a better world is possible?
And might we strive to work towards that better world, step by step, person by person,
system by system? In whatever way we can, sometimes making it up as we go along?

People: Okay, we can do that. We can keep working.
And you know, sometimes we're really good at that work! Sometimes we rejoice in
being part of this community of hope and hard work!

Leader: We are called to be hope-filled people in hopeless times.

People: Yes, Amen! With Mary, we'll give it our best try, and lead with hope!

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Candle lighting, Week One – *Hope is a Step We Take*

Candle-lighters come forward, each bringing with them a symbol they have chosen that speaks to them of hope – a picture, or object, or even a word printed on a piece of paper. They place these symbols near the candle of hope (far from the flame!), and briefly say how their symbols express hope. Then they begin the reading; inviting the congregation to join in on their parts.

Reader: Mary sings that God *will* turn the world around. Justice and peace and beauty *will* be real for all Creation! Yes, Amen! And so we sing with hope.

People: O God, we yearn for hope. Sometimes we cannot see it or touch it or taste it or feel it. Some days we don't even know what hope is.

Reader: Hope is that step we take, over and over, one foot in front of the other, towards God's new Creation. Like Mary, we embody hope.

People: Hope is that work we do together to help bring to birth God's Beloved Community of peace, justice, and the flourishing of all Creation.

Reader: Through ordinary people like Mary, through ordinary people like us, hope is here to stay!

People: God, may this be so! With you, O God, may we make it so, moving together to envision and build your new world.

All: Let us sing with hope! Let us embody hope! Let us be a people of hope!

The candle of Hope is lit.

Song *Trust the Vision* (Tune: Regent Square "Angels from the Realms of Glory")

Here we are Week One of Advent. Hope is what we're supposed to sing.

While we try, and search and wonder, mostly questions are what we bring!

But, like Mary, we'll say "Yes!" to

All the hope God is offering.

Hope is how we live and move and work within Creation's sphere

We are part of something stronger that can free us from our fear.

So, together, let's keep going,
Trust the vision, hold what's dear.

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Benediction

Celebrate the promise of God that a new world is possible. Indeed, it is already on its way, in this community of ordinary people, living within God's web of life.

Celebrate! And go forth with hope.

Advent for Ordinary People in Not Ordinary Times

Week Two – Peace

Scripture

Matthew 1: 18-25 (Joseph's dream)

Matthew 2: **[just tell the story briefly, something like this:]** The ones we know as the Three Wise Men knew that a child in Israel was to be born soon, and would become the king of the Jews. They went to Jerusalem to find out where this child would be born. King Herod got wind of this, and was threatened by this news, and this child, and schemed to do away with Jesus. Discovering that Bethlehem was the place, he sent his soldiers there to kill all the infant children under two years old.

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Meditation – *Peace is a Choice* (For one or two Readers)

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, “True peace is not the absence of conflict...but the presence of justice.”

This is Joseph. Mary's fiancé: An ordinary man, poor, and marginalized by the Empire. And, at this point in our story, very, very afraid.

This is Joseph: Wanting to act responsibly according to “way things are done”, but something is not right. The status quo says one thing, yet he dreams of another way.

This is Joseph: He's supposed to “set aside” Mary, leave her, end the relationship. Yet he dreams of another way.

This is Joseph: Listening to the dream that says: “Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife...” Listening to the divine call which ignores the status quo, and defines justice in terms of all-embracing love.

Joseph followed the vision of a new way of being. The way of justice that he chose – to take Mary as his wife and not discard her as tradition dictated – that way of justice was an act of peacemaking.

Joseph said “Alright, I'll trust the dream and walk in this new path.”

This is Herod: An extraordinary person in the world's eyes, comfortably ensconced in the power circles of Empire. And, at this point in our story, very, very afraid.

This is Herod: Grilling the Magi to find out where Jesus was born, fearful of challenges to his rule that this baby represented.

This is Herod: Choosing to live from his fear, and murdering all male children under two years of age in an attempt to wipe out the threat of the infant Jesus.

Herod and Joseph:

The way each understood the world was threatened.

The way each understood himself was threatened.

And they made choices.

Herod responded out of fear, Joseph out of trust in the vision of love.

The path Joseph chose was one of inclusivity and relationship. The path Herod chose centered only on himself, his fear, and his need for power over. Joseph's choice held the possibility of violence that might be done to him and to his family, but he moved into that choice anyway. Herod's choice held the certainty of violence towards others, and he moved into that choice anyway.

This is Joseph, an ordinary person. This is Herod, a supposedly extraordinary person. But it is through ordinary people like Joseph, and ordinary people like us, that peace can be real, peace can be here.

But peace is a choice. Do we live from fear, or instead trust a vision of a better way?

Peace is a choice. Don't be Herod. Be Joseph.

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Call to Worship

Leader: Peace on earth! Good will to all! Yes, Amen!

People: O God, peace on earth, we beg! Peace with the earth, we plead. Make it so. Make it real.

Leader: God *will* make it so, and *will* make it real, through ordinary people like us, when, like Joseph, we choose peace.

All: Let us embody peace! In our worship and our work, let us be a people of peace!

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Candle lighting – *So This Is Peace*

Candle lighters say a few words about the symbol(s) for peace they brought with them.

Reader 1: Believe it or not, there can be peace. Within ourselves, with each other, and with all Creation.

Reader 2: When we choose to push back against Business as Usual, that which has settled comfortably into the easy way;

Reader 1: When we choose to push forward towards a promise, a vision, a hope in an alternate way to be as persons and a people;

Reader 2: When we experience ourselves as a part of God's vast web of life, connected to all that is, we may, actually, know peace.

Reader 1: For peace is not the absence of strife, but the will to strive.
Peace is not silence, but listening to the silenced.

Reader 2: Peace is choosing to do all you can, here in the moment, and with what you have at hand, for the sake of God's good Creation, and all God's children.

Reader 1: Peace is following in the footsteps of Joseph, who chose the way of all-embracing love.

Reader 2: Believe it or not we can choose peace! We can experience peace! We can be peacemakers!

People: God, may this be so! With you, O God, may we make it so! Together may we make the choice for peace, and move on to envision and build your new world.

The candle of Peace is lit

Song *Trust the Vision* (Tune: Regent Square “Angels from the Realms of Glory”)

Peace just seems so hard to come by; what to do is not so clear.
Always called to make the real choice – live the vision or live from fear?
Be like Joseph, grasp for courage,
Trust the dream that’s always near.

Peace is how we live and move and work within Creation’s sphere
We are part of something stronger that can free us from our fear.
So, together, let’s keep going,
Trust the vision, hold what’s dear.

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Benediction

O beloved community, know that God’s peace will be with you. God’s peace will be in you.
God’s peace will flow from you. Trust these promises and go forth to do your good work! Amen!

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Week Three – Joy

Scripture Reading

Luke 2:8-20

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Meditation – *Bearers of joy (One or two Readers)*

Here are the shepherds: Keeping watch over their flocks by night. Alone. Cold.

Here are the shepherds: Not among society's significant power brokers. Marginalized.

Here are the shepherds: Daily risking their lives to protect their flocks. Not low on courage, they understand fear and the overcoming of it.

Here are the shepherds: Knowing joy at lambing season, welcoming new life even as they grieve the inevitable deaths. They know that joy and lament often go hand in hand.

These ordinary people are the ones to whom angels proclaimed good news.

These are the ordinary people for whom angels sang their mighty chorus.

These are the ordinary people whom angels called to be bearers of courageous joy.

The shepherd's experience with the angels began with confusion and fear, but did not stop there.

Empowered by and entrusted with the good news of peace and goodwill – of joy – they turned their backs on who the status quo said they were supposed to be and what they were supposed to do.

And went out into the night to join in on the celebration.

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Call to Worship

Leader: This is a time of joy! A time of wonder and surprise and some trepidation.

People: Yes, Amen!

Leader: What is joy for you? (**Ask the congregation to shout out one or two words about what joy is to them**)

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Leader: Joy is full and complex. It goes hand in hand with lament. It may be found dancing with uncertainty. And sometimes joy is simply the shouting out of our laughter and glee.

People: May we be that joy! May we embody that joy and live that joy! And may we be co-creators of that joy all over God's good Creation.

All: Yes, Amen!

(I would suggest the opening song here could be “Joy to the World!”, but it’s your call)

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Candle Lighting – Embrace Joy

Candle lighters say a few words about the symbol(s) for joy they brought with them.

Reader 1: We like to think the immediate response from the shepherds to the angels was as it is recorded in Luke: “Let us go unto Bethlehem...”, but in all likelihood, what they probably said was something like, “Good grief! What was that???” Or words to that effect.

Reader 2: And then... maybe they were a bit curious. And then...perhaps they were truly amazed that *they* were the recipients of an *angel’s* song, for heaven’s sake!

Reader 1: And then...maybe finally, they got really excited, were indeed filled with joy, and ran to celebrate with others the birth of something new and wonderful.

Reader 2: So, dear friends, be like the shepherds and embrace joy!

Reader 1: Embrace joy even as you know of lament. Embody joy, even as you experience tears and fears.

Reader 2: Be joy for a creation so longing to have a celebration and to be made new.

Readers 1 & 2: You can do this!

People: God, may this be so! With you, O God, may we make it so, moving together to envision and build your new world.

All: Let us sing with joy! Let us embody joy! Let us be a people of joy!

The candle of Joy is lit

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Song Trust the Vision (Tune: Regent Square “Angels from the Realms of Glory”)

God, you urge us to be joyful, like the shepherds in the night:
Celebrate with tears and laughter; know a new world’s just in sight
Be the joy the world so needs now,
Fill Creation with delight!

Joy is how we live and move and dance within Creation’s sphere
We are part of something stronger that can free us from our fear.
So, together, let’s keep going,
Trust the vision, hold what’s dear.

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Benediction

Hear the good news: joy is ours! Hear and maybe even sort of believe it! Be struck by awe at the power of something breaking through towards new life.

You can be part of the celebration, even when your heart is breaking. For joy is bone deep and soul deep. Joy is born of hope, nurtured by imagination, sustained by courage, and shared in community.

So run like the shepherds! Run through your fears, and confusion, and definitions of yourself put on to you by others. Run towards joy, which is waiting for you with open arms, to join in the celebration.

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Week Four – Love

Preparation – a few weeks before this fourth Sunday, ask people to give you their favorite quotes on love. Take a look at them before Week 4, and select one or two to be read with the scripture reading. Arrange the others in a collage to be placed near the Advent Wreath. If you are so technologically inclined, you can also make a slide to be projected during the service. Or, you could place each one on your Communion Table, or altar, next to the Advent Wreath, and after the service invite people to come forward and pick up one to take home.

Scripture reading

John 15:12

One or two of the quotes offered from members of the congregation, cited here

Meditation – *What's Love Got to Do With It?* (May be read by one or two Readers)

There are other ordinary ones in this Christmas story. Those not mentioned specifically, or if they are, only in passing. The ones who didn't make the headlines but had a part to play in the story. Sort of like most of us, right? And *these* ordinary folks embody love, as well.

Who might they be?

The sheep, the donkey, other critters at the manger, even the bugs.

And the midwife. There must have been one, or someone like her.

And all the crowds of displaced people, streaming to Bethlehem to be counted for taxation.

Not seen, and counted only for the profit of others.

So what's love got to do with it?

Here is love: the animals out in the field and at the manger, even the bugs, by the simple fact of their existence and the balance they bring to the web of life, are embodying love, connection.

Here is love:

The midwife, who joined in on the process of bringing new life to birth, who helped, encouraged, and comforted, with compassion, skill and practicality – all examples of love embodied.

Here is love:

The crowds of people, nameless, connected by history and heritage and displacement.

The crowds at Bethlehem, huddled together and crammed into rooms.
Waiting.

And there's always someone, in the crowd, who shares a blanket, or a piece of bread, or starts a song.

There's always someone. Because that's part of what we humans are. We were made to love. And so often, even in the face of all that would destroy, love persists.

Love is sometimes very, very small, nearly invisible. But real, so real.

What's love got to do with *us*?

God is love, and Love is calling us to play our part in the Web of Life.

Love is calling us to help bring a new Creation to birth, through compassion, skill, comforting, and hard work.

God calls us to be that one with the extra blanket, piece of bread, or song.

God is love, and calls *us* to love even when that seems impossible. Even when the well is dry, our souls feel empty. There is still something in us calling us to connection; a glimmer of love.

So we rest for a bit, then take a deep breath, and try again. And we help each other bring forth that glimmer of love that resides in each of us.

God is love, and Love reminds us that we do not do this work alone.

Call to Worship

Leader: Here, today, is our love "credo":

People: I believe that love...Wait, what do I believe about love?

[Silence while we think about this]

Leader: And....

People: Here is what I believe about love:

[Members of the congregation call out a phrase or two about what they believe about love. The Leader repeats the phrase to make sure everyone hears it.]

Reader 1: We believe there are all sorts of ways to believe about love. We believe there are questions, there are hopes, and there are fears about love.

Reader 2: We believe there are celebrations about love. And that love and grief are intertwined.

Reader 1: Our tradition tells us that "God so loved the world..." The entire cosmos.

Reader 2: When all is said and done, love is for everyone. Love is in everyone. Love can flow out of everyone.

People: Let us embody love – in great and small ways. Like the ordinary folks in Bethlehem, the ones who didn't make the headlines, let us embody love!

All: For the sake of God's good Creation. Yes, Amen!

Candle Lighting – *Faintly Annoying*

Candle lighters say a few words about the symbol(s) for love they brought with them.

Reader 1: To be honest, God, sometimes you can be faintly annoying –
With your call to love. All. The. Time.
With your call to leap into an unknown future.
Your call to hope in the face of all the odds
And your call to rejoice even during those times we grieve, rage, and lament.

Reader 2: God, you are love. And, Love, you can be so frustratingly difficult, that sometimes we just want to tear out our hair or shake our fists at the heavens! (And this is nothing new; your people have been telling you this for millennia, O God. Check out the Psalms for starters.)

Reader 1: But God, you *are* love. And oh, what a delight love can also be! What sweetness and possibility love offers! What a dance of joy you invite us into!

Reader 2: And we, your faintly annoying, frustratingly difficult yet delightfully sweet people, are made in your image. What were you thinking, God, when you did that? “Well, it seemed like a good idea at the time,” you’re probably saying right now.

Reader 1: But the funny thing is, God, you keep loving all your Creation (including us), All. The. Time.

People: So we, in your image, will strive to do likewise. And dance in the sweetness of your Creation’s possibilities!

The candle of Love is lit.

Song *Trust the Vision* (Tune: Regent Square “Angels from the Realms of Glory”)

God, you hold us with your loving, never ceasing or letting go.
Then you call us to do likewise: “Go ahead, this will make you grow!”
Love is hard yet love is worth it.
Celebrating, here we go!

Love is how we live and move and dance within Creation’s sphere.
We are part of something stronger that can free us from our fear.
So, together, let’s keep going,
Trust the vision, hold what’s dear.

Benediction (*Responsive*)

Leader: May you rejoice with Mary! With questions from your heart and courage from your soul,
may you proclaim a resounding “Yes!” to God’s possibilities to turn the world around.

People: May it be so. May we rejoice and help build a new Creation!

Leader: May you dream with Joseph, choosing compassion and relationship, going into the unknown with loved ones by your side.

People: May it be so! May we dream and act, for the sake of God’s Creation.

Leader: May you run with the shepherds, to join the celebration with the entire web of life.

People: May it be so. With courage let us enter into joy, as we do God’s good work together building a new world.

Leader: And may you love with God, for the sake of all creation, all earth community. For we are in this together and together we can work and hope and dance and love.

People: May it be so now and always

Leader: And may the power of this season settle into your hearts and give you life.



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