

Not Ordinary Church

Christmas Eve in the Family of Creation

This packet is divided up into three parts:

- Notes to the worship planners (pastor, church musician, other worship leaders),
- Notes on using the materials
- The actual resources.

May you find this all helpful!

Notes to pastors, musicians, worship leaders

I don't need to tell you this, but you've got your work cut out for you when it comes to planning an effective and meaningful Christmas Eve service. But I do want to tell you how much you are appreciated in your endeavors here!

Christmas is such a personal celebration, unique to each church. There's no "one size fits all" Christmas liturgy. Of course there are things most churches share in common – lighting the Christ candle, reading the Christmas stories, and singing "Silent Night" by candlelight. But, as pastor/musician/worship leader, it's your creativity and knowledge of "your people" that come into play on Christmas Eve.

There's something about Christmas Eve that's different from any other service. While on any given Sunday people carry with them their busy lives, pains, fears, and hopes – on Christmas Eve that seems to be heightened, emotions run more strongly. There's history and tradition, family and unfinished business, exhaustion and pressure that are all brought into the mix of celebration and song. And, you lucky pastors, musicians, and worship leaders get to address all this on Christmas Eve (when you're also dealing with your own history, family, exhaustion, and so on).

And, to top it all off, Christmas and Easter are those two high occasions of the church year when people not usually sitting in the congregation come to church. Perhaps they come out of tradition and habit, or because their parents (or children) dragged them there, but I believe they also come because something else is tugging at them: they come to find out if the Church has anything to say to them about their lives and the world right now.

So, Christmas Eve deals with the local congregation, but also the family of all Creation. It deals with the personal and the systemic. Broken hearts and broken systems. People and peoples searching for hope. And that's precisely where God-with-us breaks into the world.

Using the Materials

Here is a scattering of resources to be used on Christmas Eve. It consists simply of various pieces of a service – readings, song suggestions, prayers, ritual – that you can plug in as you see fit. It's not an entire Christmas Eve service, but pieces you might be able to make use of.

The collection consists of: A Call to Worship (opening words, done by two readers), a ritual for Lighting of the Christ Candles, various other readings, and a meditative piece/essay that you could simply read to yourself as you prepare to plan the service (or, if you're really short on time, you can turn it into a short meditation for the service itself!).

Now for a few notes on using the materials.

You can pick and choose what you use. However, when you pick a piece, please use the whole reading (poem, prayer) and not parts of it. But you don't need to use everything here! But the larger ritual of Lighting of the Christ Candles should be done in its entirety; don't just use pieces of it.

The words in ***bold-face red italics*** are directions for the leaders, and not to be printed in the bulletin.

Lighting of the Christ Candles

- The Heading “Lighting of the Christ Candles” is not a typo! It's intentional that “candles” is plural – the spirit of Christ extends into all that shall be named in the lighting of the votive candles, whether in affirmation, or in commitment to change.
- You will need a Christ Candle, of course, but also a collection of small votive candles (the ones in glass holders burn for longer and are safer than the tea lights), and a means to light them all. The votive candles can be any color, or a mix of colors, or white.
- One-half of the votive candles are to be lit as the candle lighters list off “those we bring with us in spirit this evening.” I've given you some examples, but you can come up with your own as well, based on your congregation's passions, concerns, and experience. *Just make sure the list you come up with includes systemic/global as well as personal, and other-than-human as well as human.*
- The other set of votive candles will be lit when the candle lighter leads the responsive section on “the light shines, Christ lives!” This time, a list is provided, so you don't need to brainstorm your own. Some things go beyond the local interests and experience of one congregation.
- All this will all be made clearer as you read the actual ritual!

I wish you and your congregation a blessed Christmas Eve, and a good night's sleep!

Resources for the Service

Opening Words of Celebration *[led by two worship leaders]*

Reader One: Rejoice! We have come to this time, to Christmas Eve! It's a time of celebration! And it's tinged with the unknown, the hoped-for, and the unexpected.

Reader Two: Some of us are raising a cheer, and dancing with delight. Some of us are weary beyond words and yearning for rest – yet at the same time wanting so to join in on the dance. And some of us – probably most of us – are a bit of both.

Reader One: Here we are, then, however we are, gathered together in the presence of God and this community. In that simple act of gathering – in person or online – we are together. In the Christmas whirlwind of emotion, of activities, of seeking, trying, wondering and yearning, we are together, and God is in this place. That is reason enough to celebrate!

Reader Two: And here we are, also, gathered in the midst of an imperfect and broken world, searching for starlight and the angels' song of peace.

Reader One : Then we turn to one another and know that the song is here, in us, waiting for us to sing with our lives to our broken world. And then in that singing we know what this season of celebration is about: Love and wonder, hope and hard work, justice and joy.

Reader Two: So we raise a ragged cheer, and stumble a few dance steps, and pretty soon we're having a party.

Reader One: Come to the celebration!

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Suggested Carol – "O Come, All Ye Faithful"

Litany of Celebration

One: We celebrate! This night we celebrate! We are not unknowing of the hurts and struggles, injustices, and griefs in our world, in ourselves, and in the whole web of life. But still we celebrate a community of love, and the good news that life triumphs.

All: We hold out hope, we work for peace, and amazingly, we find joy. And, of course, we love. Oh, how we love!

One: We celebrate! Even if joy is at times seemingly unreachable, and grief inconsolable, we affirm that this, too, is part of the Christmas story. The angels burst through into the night of a cold, imperfect, and shattered world, and yet they sang of peace and joy.

All: So, too, will we!

One: The angels burst through into a world of violence and oppression and sang of peace and joy. Did they lie? Were they simply misinformed? No, it is up to us – together – to bear witness to, and bring to birth, the truth of their song: Peace on earth, goodwill to all!

There is something deep and solid in the core of the angels' song, the Christmas story. There is something deep and solid that kept a community going for two millennia, and that keeps us going even now, even if we don't have all the words to explain it.

All: But the angels sang, and so will we! In our work and worship, in all our lives, we will sing the angels' song: Peace on earth, goodwill to all!

Reading – *It's an old, old story****Read by two worship leaders***

Reader One: We have gathered here on this night of celebration and song, of ritual and remembrance, to hear again an old, old story. It has to do with angels, and a hay-filled barn with a bunch of people (and sheep) wondering how they got there and what comes next.

Reader Two: We are here because of an old, old story. It has to do with God-with-us. God has always been with us. We have not always been with God, and sometimes it's easy to forget all this "God with us" business.

Reader One: So we gather to remember, to remind each other, and to celebrate an old, old story that is ours even in these new and unsettling times.

Reader Two: And then we are sent back out into the world because of that old, old story. It has to do with love and justice, turning the world around, and building up a new world where Creation truly will be at peace.

Suggested carol – "O Little Town of Bethlehem"

Reading – *Deep Into the Dark*

Christmas is contradiction and wonder, soft candle-light and fear.

Christmas goes deep into the dark, yet we search for it in glitter,
and we decorate with tinsel the tears of those left behind, those left out, those left alone.

Christmas goes deep into the dark to meet us there;
deep into the dark to touch with power those left behind, those left out, those left alone

Christmas is where points of pain meet, yet are met with something of life,

Christmas is raising a candle together in the dark, daring to sing of love.

Christmas taps us on the shoulder with a shepherd's crook, and we begin to smell the sheep, and
the unwashed bodies of their keepers who simply say, "Come with us,..."

They're the ones who really know the way to Bethlehem:

Where lament and possibility intertwine, not destroying each other, but listening.

Where love and loss sit side by side, like two old people on a park bench, one occasionally
resting their head on the other's shoulder.

Because Christmas is not some celestial pastry in the "sweet-by-and-by..." but finds its home in
the dirt and the blood and the sinew of each of us.

Christmas is
warmth and cold
light and dark
joy and pain
work and rest
mystery and surprise

But always a presence
of something holy
of community
of dancers in the dark
of candlelight's defiance, power, and hope
of laughter and song
of you, of me, and the sacred spaces between and among and within us.

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***To be read by the pastor or worship leader. You could add the carol "It Came Upon the
Midnight Clear" before the reading begins.***

Lighting of the Christ Candles *[One or two readers, and one or two candle lighters]*

Reading – “A Candle in the Night” *[Read by the worship leader]*

We stood in a circle around the dimly-lit sanctuary on a cold December evening.
We held our candles up high and sang.

And I thought,

“This is the Church, throughout time and space, holding a light in the night. And singing.”

Holding light.

Not the light of Absolute Truth. Not the light of My Way. Not the light of Colonization.
But the light of defiance and hope.

The light that shines even when the gloom is a given.

Even when all our efforts to embody hope, to bring peace with justice, to live with joy,
and to love fiercely and courageously, all don’t seem to make a difference – even
then, a candle in the night.

Even as pandemics of disease, violence, environmental devastation, division, apathy and
fear tempt us again and again to deny, or exclude, or hide away, or seek easy answers;
even as we try so hard, yet falter –
Even then: A candle in the night.

Because this is who we are. This is Church:

Movement. Acting. Singing in the night.

Ritual and Prayer.

Laughter and Tears

Building community, expanding the circle.

Dismantling systems that oppress and destroy.

Fighting against extinction.

This is who we are. And this is the power of love.

Candle Lighters and other Readers come forward

Oh Come, Emmanuel, come, God-with-us. What has seemed so far away in some unknown
heaven is with us. What does it mean, then, God-with-us, when the “us” includes also creatures
and air, mountains and seas, seed and starlight?

Who do we bring with us, then, this evening? Who do we bring with us that once seemed so far,
yet in reality is truly near, connected in the web of life? Who did we never realize was family,
but in reality has always been? What does it mean to hold them close this night?

Lighting of the Christ Candles

Scripture reading – John 1, selections (NRSV) *[Worship leader]*

“...What came into being in [Christ] was life, and the life was the light of all people. The
light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”

Candle Lighter lights the large Christ Candle

***Candle Lighter lights their lighter off of the Christ candle, then lights half of the votive
candles, while Reader says:***

Reader:

This is who we bring this evening, no longer far, but near, holding close and connected:

[Each votive candle represents something; as each is lit, the Reader or Candle Lighter says words like: “For species brought back from extinction” or “For missing and murdered Native American women and transgender folk,” and the Congregation responds each time with, “We hold you close”]

For species brought back from extinction,
Congregation’s Response: We hold you close

For missing and murdered Native American women and transgender folks
We hold you close

For... *[words of your own choosing; plan this ahead of time]*
We hold you close

Etc.

Oh Come, Emmanuel, come! Be born in us today.

Candle Lighter lights the rest of the votive candles, saying, “In every act of justice, the light shines! Christ lives!”

Reader:

In every act of justice, the light shines! Christ lives!

When refugees find a home and all homeless are housed
Congregation’s Response: The light shines! Christ lives!

When hate is overcome by love
The light shines! Christ lives!

When mental and emotional wellness are restored
The light shines! Christ lives!

When the air and water are clean,
The light shines! Christ lives!

In acts of generosity and courage, acts of justice and compassion, acts of accountability and restoration,
The light shines! Christ lives!

In the challenging of systems that destroy and demean,
The light shines! Christ lives!

When we dare to not give up, and when we hear Creation’s cries because they are our own,
The light shines! Christ lives!

When we gather in community and celebrate, and we know we do not do this work alone,
The light shines! Christ lives!

Suggested Song – “Joy to the World!”

Meditation – On What I Know and Don't Know About Christmas

Driving in the neighborhood one afternoon in December, I saw a car sporting a bright red nose, reindeer antlers sprouting from each of the side front windows. It made me smile to think of that driver moving through the season in a giant reindeer.

By Northern Hemisphere reckoning, this is the darkest time of the year. And cold. It made me smile to remember that in the darkness of time and history, there is still playfulness. I don't know what "spirit of Christmas" the driver was trying to impart. But I do know I was caught by that spell of play and humor.

A light shines in the darkness, and sometimes it makes us laugh.

I don't always know what to make of this holiday season. But I do know there is something holy, some power, some force – love, if you will – that has entered our world of messiness, violence, grief, injustice. It has always been there but we needed reminding.

I do know that love – the core of Christmas – is light that shines in the darkness, proclamation and reminder that the darkness will not overcome it.

And I have watched the core of Christmas emerge in surprising ways:

- At the funeral home on a dark afternoon, I watched as two brothers walked together to the casket; the younger could just barely see over its rim. I watched as the older brother stood with the younger, and gently stroked his back and talked quietly to him as they looked upon their mother. Did they gather at a sort of manger? One birthing grief, gentleness, and love in the face of loss. And a light shone in the darkness.
- At another time and place, in the nursing home one late afternoon, I watched a parishioner as she sat beside her husband of sixty years, gently talking to him as he lay there, agitated yet unresponsive. I watched as she gave him the Communion I had brought, dipping a small sponge into the grape juice, tenderly moving it around the inside of his mouth. I watched as he calmed and rested, the sacrament of taste and touch penetrating his ravaged brain. Had he heard the angels' "Fear not"?
- And at funeral reception, I watched as the family, repeatedly touched by tragedy, laughed and danced, tripping over each other, singing as they danced. Life reasserting itself. Community of shared pain, memory, joy. Tears never far, emptiness just at the edges, but the light shone in the darkness.

I may not know a lot of things, but I do know that Christmas is about something truly grand, and that it fights against all that would tear creation apart.

And I know it takes our participation for that to happen. No *Deus ex machina*, this, but a young woman giving birth on a cold night in a barn, with poor and dispossessed shepherds the bearers of the good news.

It's an older brother helping a little boy navigate grief, an old woman's sacramental touch, and a grieving family with the courageous audacity to dance.

I've watched love and loss, community and hope, courage and compassion, pain and laughter.

I've watched life moving in and through, love holding tight and letting go.

I've watched and witnessed, with the shepherds and the animals, the core of Christmas unfolding, settling in, taking root.



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