

Toda la Tierra Espera (All Earth Is Waiting)

Advent 2025 Worship Series

INTRODUCTION

Advent is the beginning of a new year of waiting, but it is an active and watchful waiting. It is tapping into the world's longing for redemption, salvation, and transformation. The beautiful and singable hymn *Toda la Tierra*, 210 in the *United Methodist Hymnal*, is a reminder of what is at stake. "All the world, bound and struggling, seeks true liberty" in the first verse allows us to look back to the story of the Incarnation and to look forward to the coming of the kingdom of heaven, when the will of God will be done on earth as in heaven. All of earth is waiting for this fulfillment. In worship, we can see the signs of the nearness of Emmanuel, God with us.

First Sunday of Advent – Signs and Times

November 30, 2025

[Matthew 24:36-44](#)

Color – Blue or Purple

PLANNING NOTES

Stop. Take a moment. Breathe deeply. We have arrived—again—at the beginning of the journey. That's the strange thing about this season. Advent sits us down in the liminal space of God's already-and-not-yet kingdom and asks us to wait. Now, if you're around young children for any length of time, you will be reminded that waiting is very hard. Whether it's in the car, the grocery store line, or a doctor's office, my child despises waiting. About five minutes in, I start getting "How much longer, Mom? I have nothing to do! I'm bored!!!" Not too long ago, tired of hearing, "I'm bored" and, honestly, a little concerned that my twenty-first-century child perhaps needed to experience boredom a little more because boredom requires us to be creative (more on that another time), I decided it was time to teach him to live into the boredom. So, now, every time he says he's bored, I require that he do a mindfulness exercise with me where he has to tell me five things he can see, four things he can touch, three things he can hear, two things he can smell, and one thing he can taste. Of the many benefits this activity has, it requires him (and me) to de-center our discomfort at waiting so that we can pay attention to what is happening around us. Perhaps this is the role of Advent—to teach us to pay attention and figure out what is ours to do as we faithfully wait for the birth of the Christ child and the fulfillment of God's kingdom.

We encourage you to use the first week of Advent to set the stage for the season to come. In this series, we will explore the signs God gives us in our waiting, those lessons and encounters that guide us along our journey. For many, this season is where we use dark blue or purple paraments or cloth on the altar. Consider adding a clock or multiple kinds of clocks to your altar space to reference the "times" of "Signs and Times." Add gold accents or candles to help capture the light and play up the contrast of light and darkness, as both are our teachers and companions on the Advent journey.

Also, consider what you want your congregation to take into the Advent season. Perhaps you want to encourage everyone to do a daily breath prayer practice based on a scripture for each week of Advent, such as:

(*breathe in*) Help me wait and be ready,

(*breathe out*) to encounter Jesus wherever I go.

Perhaps there's a hymn that will act as a unifying or "theme" song throughout Advent. Examples include "Toda la Tierra/All Earth Is Waiting" (United Methodist Hymnal 210), "Wait for the Lord" (Worship & Song 3049), or even "New Redemption Song" performed by Over the Rhine (<https://youtu.be/tK6-s6qUJeo?si=zK7a2JF3VWgVbZ-P>). Using a prayer or a song that threads throughout Advent invites congregants to practice paying attention to God's guidance in the midst of our waiting as the body of Christ.

PREACHING NOTES

We aren't good at waiting. It isn't in our cultural DNA. I've lived in other parts of the world for a time and discovered that other nations, other cultures, do the waiting thing a whole lot better than we do. We want everything right now. Fast food wasn't fast enough, so we put in drive-through windows. (By the way, shouldn't that be "drive-by windows"? I've always wondered about that.) Prepackaged meal preparation wasn't fast enough, so now we put it in a microwave. We don't like standing in line. I've jumped from one line to the next, hoping that the new one would go faster, only to discover that the original started moving. And I felt like I lost some competition! Are we there yet?

That is why Advent is such a difficult season—because it is all about waiting! No wonder each Advent season is a wrestling bout between poor, overmatched Advent and the cultural juggernaut called Christmas. We might as well give in and admit that all we are doing is trying to hold back the tide that will bring Christmas crashing to the shores of our lives with certain inevitability. Why fight it?

I love Christmas; let me go on record here. I love all aspects of Christmas, even what some think is its commercialization. I love how this event transformed a nation and parts of the world and caused folks to change gears, rethink, and set themselves aside for a time. Yeah, they don't always get the "true meaning of Christmas." But I've read a couple of theological tomes trying to explain the Incarnation, and I can't say I fully understand it either. There is something of a mystery here. So, not knowing is not a bad thing. And yes, priorities get smooshed around (that's a bit of theological jargon, in case you were wondering), and disappointment seems to abound at Christmas time because expectations are misplaced. But still, I love Christmas and the seemingly magical potential for change in the air at this time of year.

But having said that, Advent is not just about Christmas. There is more to Advent than a countdown to Christmas. Advent is a reminder that we are heading somewhere. We have a destination as a people. Advent lets us stop and ask, "Are we there yet?" The implication is that we know where "there" is. We have a vision of where we are heading, so we start every Advent season with a check of the map. Here's where we are heading:

In days to come the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go

forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the LORD! (Isaiah 2:2-5 NRSV)

That's the "there." Are we "there" yet? Well, the answer is obvious. That brings up another reason we want to set Advent aside and get to the goodies at Christmas. Christmas, we can count on. It will be here, ready or not. It may not be all we had hoped it would be; our dinner table might not look like the spread in *Martha Stewart Living*; the decorations might not be photographed for *Midwest Living's* Christmas issue; our family might not come together like the ones in innumerable Christmas specials on TV - but come Hell or high water (and some Christmases have been elements of both, in my experience), Christmas will come. But this other thing... this vision of peace and community... this kingdom of God thing that Jesus seemed so keen on ... are we there yet? Not by a long shot. We have "miles to go before we sleep."

And what is worse, the journey seems fraught with danger and disaster on every side. Even Jesus seems to claim that in our Gospel reading for this first Sunday of Advent. I've tried to use Jesus' words as an answer on long vacation trips: "Of that day and hour no one knows." It is less than satisfying, let me tell you. No one knows? When are we going to get there? What do we have to do to get there? Do we know if we are on the correct route to get there? It is hard to know. And we want to know. But Jesus says we can't know—at least about the destination. In fact, he seems to imply that a preoccupation with wanting to know is akin to blasphemy. He says that if you had known, you would have been doing the wrong things.

But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into (Mt 24:43). We have trouble with this image in the first place. Comparing Jesus' return to that of a thief in the night gives us pause, to say the least. We have to turn our brains upside-down enough to hear what he is saying. First, the return of the Son is a good thing, not an easy thing, but a good thing. And doing what you can to stop it is a bad thing - maybe something that seems sensible but really isn't. So, he says, if you had all the information and knew the game plan, you would likely do the wrong thing—the thing that keeps it from coming.

"Wait a minute," we would argue, we want the kingdom to come. Don't we pray every week, "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done ON EARTH as it is in heaven"? Do you think we don't mean it? Well, maybe. The point of the passage is that we sometimes protect, value, and place our trust in the wrong things. The householder is just that: someone who wants to hold onto the house. In the kingdom, that house won't matter. The things this society prizes won't matter in the kingdom. So, in effect, when the Son comes - when the true Christmas comes - he will take away all the things of this world. That doesn't sound too good to those of us who are attached to our things. We just might stay up all night to keep our grip on the stuff we think we need if we think someone is going to come and take it all away.

But Jesus says that is not our mission. We are not called to stay up nights, protecting our stuff or our status or our political configurations or our sense of superiority or —well, you fill in the gap. But if that is the case, what is our mission? If we are not about the business of preserving our way of life, then what are we supposed to be doing?

Two men are working in a field...two women are grinding corn... What does that mean? It means we are to be about the business of living. We are called to provide for our families. We are called to create a sense of home in this world. But at the same time, we are called to keep watch, which means we are asked to hold much of this world a little more loosely. We, the ones who were taken (meaning those gathered into the community of faith - not taken away in a rapture kind of experience), are to remember and to be the sign that we have a destination and that we aren't there yet.

Aren't where? On the highest mountain. Isaiah says, "In the days to come." Some translations say, "in the latter days" or something like that. The original Hebrew was closer to "someday," not just at the end. Someday, this will happen. Someday is within our reach. Someday is within the realm of possibility. "In the last days" sounds so final, so out there, that it is beyond us. Someday might mean when we get around to it, when we've moved closer to it.

What will happen on that "someday"? The mountain of the Lord will be established as the highest mountain. Some of the action items in the Isaiah passage are things God is going to do - God will teach, God will lead, God will judge. Some of the items are things we are called to do: We will invite; we will go to the mountain, and we will beat the swords into plowshares and the spears into pruning hooks. Did you notice that last bit? We will beat the swords; that isn't something God will do at the end of time. It is something we are called to do as a part of walking in the ways of the Lord. Or as Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers" (not the peace wishers or the peace hoppers). *Blessed are the peacemakers.*

Have we beaten any swords lately? Or have we left them there to use when necessary? Have we left them there as a contingency against those who might want to hurt us? Have we left them there as a sign that we can rely on our own strength, our own pride, our own stuff to get us where we are going? *Are we there yet?*

The action item of the establishment of the mountain is left vague. Who is doing that? "In days to come, the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains..." Who is doing that? Who is making the Lord's house the highest priority in our lives? Who is making sure that God's will, God's direction, God's vision is the center, the peak of our existence every day and during this Christmas season? Who is doing that?

Maybe it is a joint task: God and us together, speaking and listening, teaching and learning, coming and hoping. What are you waiting for? *Are we there yet?*

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

Call to Worship

Beloved, once again, we embark on the Advent path that points us to the coming of Jesus.

We journey together toward the day that all the earth awaits.

We remember the signs and the times that heralded the arrival of the baby Jesus, God Incarnate.

We journey together toward the day that all the earth awaits.

We tell the stories once again as we learn how to discern the signs and the times, watching for glimpses of God's here-and-not-yet kingdom among us.

We journey together toward the day that all the earth awaits.

Come, let us worship God who shines a light to guide us on the path to peace and flourishing for all creation.

Come, let us worship as we journey together toward the day that all the earth awaits.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, May 2025

Prayers of the People

In the hushed anticipation of your coming, O Lord,
kindle in us the desire to remain awake;
that we might be ready for your coming and eager to pray.

O God, in days to come,
the mountain of your house will be established,
and your joy shall reign.
We pray for the church (especially...),
that you might teach us your ways and that we might walk in your paths.
Come, Lord Jesus, and hear our prayer.

Out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
and you, O God, shall judge between the nations.
We pray for our nation, and all nations,
that your peace would be manifest in every corner of the earth.
Come, Lord Jesus, and hear our prayer.

In your Kingdom, O Lord,
wolves lie down with lambs
and children play with serpents without fear.

We pray for the sick, the suffering,
and those in distress of any kind (especially...);
that you would heal all injuries, comfort all grief,
and settle all wrongs.
Come, Lord Jesus, and hear our prayer.

In your Kingdom, O Lord,
even the wilderness and dry land are glad and rejoice.
We pray for those who rejoice this week
as they celebrate their birthday (especially... and anniversaries...);
that they might obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing might flee away.
Come, Lord Jesus, and hear our prayer.

In the fullness of time, O God,
you sent your son to be born of our sister Mary.
And his name was Emmanuel: God with Us.
We thank you for your Presence with us,
and we pray that you might be always present
with those whom we love but see no longer.
Come, Lord Jesus, and hear our prayer.

Come among us, O God, and hear our prayers;
so that when your Son Jesus comes among us
with great might, and in manger mild,
we might recognize his face and his voice,
and come to adore him. Amen.

Written by Fr. Rick Morley and posted on rick morley, <http://www.rickmorley.com/archives/207>. Reposted on the re:Worship blog at <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2013/10/advent-intercessions.html>.

Prayer of Confession

Holy One,

You call us to wake from sleep,

to become aware to our surroundings.

The dawn of a new time of preparation is upon us.

Forgive us when sleepiness takes its toll,

when our discussions become battles,

when our judgment and self-judgement outweigh our faith.

Let us put on the light of Christ

and live as You have called us

in respect, in mutual dialogue, and in healthy living.

Help us so that everything we do reflects Christ's light. Amen.

Posted on Fight the Bees. Reposted on the re:Worship blog at <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2013/10/prayer-of-confession-wake-from-sleep.html>.

Benediction

Advent people, go from this place in the blessing of God who journeys with us, guiding our path as we wait, watch, and work for the day when we beat swords into plowshares and follow the path of peace until God's kingdom comes on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, May 2025.

CANDLE-LIGHTING LITURGY

First Reader: The prophet Isaiah calls to us from the past to imagine the future when God's reign will be fully realized and recognized throughout creation. When that time comes, God "shall judge between the nations and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation; neither shall they learn war any more" (Isaiah 2:4).

All: Today, we choose to live in hope, believing that the time of God's reign has come and is coming among us.

Second Reader: We light this candle of hope as a sign of our promise to follow the Light as we answer God's call to transform our hope into reality today and in the days to come.

Light the first candle of the Advent wreath.

Second Sunday of Advent – Signs and Stories

December 07, 2025

Matthew 3:1-12

Color – Blue or Purple

PLANNING NOTES

Once upon a time... Not exactly words we associate with the Bible, but certainly words we associate with telling a story. We hear “once upon a time,” and our ears perk up. We’re ready to get lost in a tale that is both fantastical and all too human. But the wonder of stories is that they communicate truths deeper than mere facts. They help us discover truths about ourselves and our community, the way humans relate to one another, what it means to believe, and how we embody our beliefs. Now, hear me: I am not contesting the truth about the events in the Bible. Rather, I wonder if sometimes we get so caught up in the Bible as a telling of events that we miss the truth underneath the events.

This is particularly relevant for this week’s text and our Advent journey. Here we have John the Baptist, that locust-and-honey-eating prophet living in the wilderness and calling people then and now to repent. This is a story we might associate more with Baptism of the Lord Sunday, when we encounter the fulfillment, the “end of the story” of this passage. But this is Advent. We don’t resolve stories in Advent. We live in the tension of the not yet. And in this tension, John the Baptist invites us to repent, to change our story, to redefine our “once upon a time” in light of the good news—the good news John the Baptist hoped for but had not yet seen.

As you plan worship for this day, consider how to present and represent the stories you tell in this space. Perhaps add stacks of books or an open children’s book. If your church has certain symbols it’s known for in the community, highlight those in the space. Think about ways to emphasize your congregation’s part in God’s story throughout worship. How might your Advent wreath liturgy today connect your church’s story to the story of God’s salvific work in the world? Many communities will celebrate Holy Communion this Sunday. As you come to the Table, remind the community that the Communion liturgy is a prayer based in story. In Holy Communion, we prayerfully encounter a story that shapes and re-shapes us as individuals and a community. Consider what prayer of confession to use as part of the Communion liturgy. How might we all join in John the Baptist’s invitation to repent, recognizing that our confession and repentance writes in us and through us a story of good news and life-giving grace?

PREACHING NOTES

By now, we’re into the story. Week two in the season of Advent feels right. Week one is a shock, to be honest. We’re not ready, even though the call is to get ready, to be ready. So, we come into the season with confession. We’re not ready; we haven’t been ready. We’ve been caught up in our own stories, getting by, getting ahead. But now it’s week two, and we’ve gotten our Advent bearings; we’ve remembered our Advent legs as we walk the journey into a promised future.

Or maybe not. John comes alongside to tell us we aren’t ready. We haven’t yet claimed the story as our story. We aren’t yet living and dying by the promise. We haven’t become the story and lived as the sign. Not yet. At least that’s what he says. Doesn’t he?

This is an odd text when you dig into it. It is hard to take the temperature of this event. Something powerful is going on. John has tapped into a felt need; he resonates with a deep longing in the hearts of a nation. He starts with good news: “The kingdom of heaven has come near” (3:2). Wow. Really? Near? We’re almost there? It’s almost here? I know, we get wrapped up in the first word of this news: *Repent*. “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (*Matthew 3:2 NRSV*). Suddenly, the good news doesn’t sound so good. *Repent!* That implies something is wrong or something is broken. *Repent* means feeling sorry and confessing and multiple *mea culpas*. Doesn’t it?

What if repenting is something else? Not the groveling admission of our many inadequacies, but a willingness to live by a different story? John might be issuing an invitation rather than a condemnation. “Get on board,” he says, because what you long for is within reach. Make a turn, veer from the path you are on, and follow a new sign, a new hope. It’s right there for the taking, says John, if you’ll just turn—as Moses turned aside at the burning bush. Just say you want to see and want to be a part of this kingdom of heaven thing.

Now, here’s the weird part. After we spend a moment reflecting on the attire of the preacher (still happens today, don’t you think?), we see that the crowds were coming, confessing, turning, wading into the waters of the kingdom of heaven. It’s a wonderful sight. Then Matthew says, “But when he saw the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism.” Notice it doesn’t say “standing on the bank with a condescending look.” It doesn’t say, passing judgment or trying to prevent the crowds from coming forward. It says they were coming forward for baptism. But John shouts at them and calls them baby snakes. Then he says, “Who warned you to flee the wrath to come?” Um, you did. Didn’t you? Isn’t that your thing, John?

Then he adds a new dimension to his invitation. “Bear fruit worthy of repentance.” He no longer says just repent, but bear fruit worthy of repentance. Show that you have indeed made the turn. Live differently, he asks. It’s not just a matter of thinking differently. The implication is that the Pharisees and Sadducees who show up for baptism need to prove their repentance by changing who they are. As long as they are participating in an oppressive system, John isn’t willing to accept that their repentance is real. The story they are telling with their lives is different from the one they claim to want to join. So, John pushes, digs a little deeper, gets personal. This isn’t an easy ride, he says; it’s not a walk in the park. We’re just getting started. There is more to come.

That is the Advent story even today. There is more to come. And that more is what motivates us, what drives us. It is the vision by which we walk, the story by which we live. More than that, it is the story that we tell with our living every day for justice and peace, for equity and hospitality. We are the sign that this story is the one that shapes our lives, the hope by which we live.

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

Call to Worship

Beloved, we gather to remember who we are, not who the world tells us to be.

We tell the story together of the day that all the earth awaits.

We recall the story of God's people, how God has called us to live in peace and righteousness in a world full of conflict and twisted morality.

We tell the story together of the day that all the earth awaits.

We recount the story of our journey with God, the moments of God's provision, God's prodding, and God's prophetic guidance.

We tell the story together of the day that all the earth awaits.

We gather to repent and return anew to God's story that guides our lives to work for peace and flourishing for all God's creation.

We gather to tell the story of the day that all the earth awaits. Thanks be to God! Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, May 2025.

Prayer for the Day

Loving God,

be to us as a bulldozer of the spirit.

Clear your road in us;

clear a path through the detritus of possessions and obsessions.

Thrust aside our divided aims and devious games.

Topple the ramparts of pride and the doubts that deride.

Make a highway on which Christ may come

and take possession of the whole territory of our being.

To the glory of your name, we pray.

Amen!

*Written by Bruce Prewer and posted on Bruce Prewer's Home Page, <http://www.bruceprewer.com/>.
Reposted on the re:Worship blog at <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2012/11/opening-prayer-prepare-way.html>.*

Prayer of Confession

When our faith is rooted deeply in you, O God,
our lives reflect your kingdom values of justice and righteousness,
but sometimes our lives become so entangled with the values of the world,
that your values take second place.

Forgive us, O God,
and reconnect us to the Holy Spirit,
source of power and life.

Merciful God, strip our hearts and minds
of all that prevents our lives being firmly rooted in you.
May our lives bear fruit worthy of our faith in you,
as we watch and wait for your breaking into our world once more,
in the person of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour.
Amen.

Assurance of Forgiveness

Blessed be the Lord our God, who does wondrous things (Psalm 72:8).
The most wondrous of all being God's entry into our world in Jesus Christ,
"not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him."
"Those who believe in him are not condemned" (John 3:17,18).
Thanks be to God!

Posted on Jane Stranz's Of Life, Laughter and Liturgy blog,

*<http://stranzdocs.blogspot.ca/2007/12/advent-liturgy-for-visit-of-archbishop.html>. Re-posted on the
re:Worship blog at <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2013/11/confession-advent-2a.html>.*

Benediction

Advent people, go now in the blessing and inspiration of God to live God's story wherever you go, that your lives may be an invitation to others to join in the journey to the day that all the earth awaits.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, May 2025.

CANDLE-LIGHTING LITURGY

First Reader: Advent reminds us that we are people who share a story, the story of Jesus, who enacts peace by judging in favor of the poor and deciding with equity for the meek of the earth. We long for the day when "the wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion will feed together, and a little child shall lead them" (Isaiah 11:6).

All: Today, we choose to live the story of peace, believing that true peace comes when we seek the flourishing of all God's creation.

Second Reader: We light this candle of peace as a sign of our commitment to bring Light to the places the world seeks to hide until that day when all creation lives together in harmony and abundance.

Light the second candle of the Advent wreath.

Third Sunday of Advent – Signs and Truth

December 14, 2025

[Matthew 11:2-11](#)

Color – Blue or Purple

PLANNING NOTES

The Third Sunday in Advent, often called Gaudete (Rejoice) Sunday, is perhaps one of the most paradoxical Sundays in the liturgical calendar. Here we are in the middle of Advent, the days growing longer and darker, the tension of the already-and-not-yet coming of Christ at the forefront of our worship, and then—Rejoice! Light the pink candle; let the musicians take charge; let's sing and be glad! It's jarring, isn't it? But it's also fitting. We need joy as a companion on our journey. Perhaps we need it more than ever when darkness feels close at hand, literally or metaphorically. We can learn a lot from darkness. We need it, but we also need the light. We need the balance of sadness and joy, grief and rejoicing. We need to know that even when we can't find joy in our own hearts, we can somehow find it in community together.

In today's scripture passage, John the Baptist wants to know the truth about Jesus, and Jesus replies with (my paraphrase), "Well, what do you notice? What am I actually doing? The truth of who I am is in what I do." So, worship planners, what do you notice? What is Jesus doing among us? What is the truth about God that your congregation needs to witness in this season of Advent?

Most congregations have set traditions for Gaudete Sunday. For many, this is a significant music Sunday. You might sing a lot of hymns as a congregation or have the choir sing a cantata. You might have extra instrumentalists who enliven the storytelling and prayers of the community. All of this is good and right and beautiful. And we want to encourage you not to jump ahead to Christmas too fast. It can be tempting to make this a bit of a pre-Christmas celebration. We sing of the birth of Jesus, and then next week, we put him back in the womb until Christmas Eve.

I'm not saying it's wrong to sing about Jesus' birth on Gaudete Sunday. Instead, let today be about recognizing the signs of God's truth in the story of our waiting from the prophets to Elizabeth to Mary to the shepherds to John the Baptist...to now. Today is a day to rejoice in the ways Truth seeps in through the cracks and lights up our waiting with hope and joy. So, fill the altar with things that help us find our way—compasses, maps, scripture. Fill the space with singing and praying as we worship God, who saves and comes to live among us. Fill the hearts of the gathered community with the joy that comes from following the truth of God's love as we wait for the coming of Christ.

PREACHING NOTES

It is easy to find stuff to get upset about without even thinking about it too hard. There are always things that seem to be against you. The world rarely seems to turn in your favor. Sometimes it is small, unimportant stuff, and when you think about it, you almost have to laugh in embarrassment that you were so bothered by it. At other times, it is a serious, life-threatening kind of thing, and nearly everyone would understand if you felt oppressed.

Except maybe Jesus. Not that Jesus isn't sympathetic, not that he isn't into comforting the afflicted. He does have that "come to me" invitation tucked away somewhere. But there also seems to be this attitude of "get over it" about him. Remember another storm? One at sea this time, the disciples were scared out of their wits, scared for their lives – "Don't you care that we are going to die?" they screamed at him. Jesus rebuked the storm; Jesus walked on the waves and said, "Where is your faith?" Boom. Get over it. Maybe that sounds harsh to you. It does to me, I admit. But it's a message I need to hear every now and then, especially on the quiet side of a storm front.

What does this have to do with the Third Sunday of Advent? Good question; thanks for asking. The Third Sunday of Advent is different. The mood shifts a bit. It is pinker, for one thing. More pink? Grammar fails me sometimes. I'm referring to the Advent Wreath. You may have noticed that often there are three different colors of candles there. There's the white center one of course, the Christ candle, lit on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day as a reminder of the presence of the Christ. But the ring of candles will often have three purple or blue ones and one pink candle in the circle. The pink candle is for the Third Sunday, Gaudete Sunday. *Gaudete* is Latin for Joy. The pink candle reminds us of joy in the midst of the harried season. This is the call to joy when we've been overwhelmed by the prophets telling us to watch out, shouting out warnings aplenty, telling us to duck and cover, the other shoe is about to drop. Yikes.

Joy? Yes, we need a reminder of joy in the midst of it all. In our frenzied preparations, as we gasp at the calendars and realize that Christmas is about to leap out at us and we aren't yet ready, we need a reminder of joy. Along comes the Third Sunday of Advent to do just that with pink candles and old promises and Jesus saying, "Pay attention." You remember the old promises: Isaiah, for example:

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus, it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God. Strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you." Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy (Isaiah 35:1-6 NRSV).

Ah, now we get it. That's a promise we can wrap our hopes around. Someday, what is wrong will be made right, what is broken will be made whole, what is scattered will be gathered up again. Thank you, Isaiah, we get it now. We who live in abundance often forget what we lack; we who live with our basic needs satisfied forget what needs still haunt us. In a desert culture, it is easier to long for flowing water. We may not be as dry physically as the first hearers of Isaiah's proclamation, but our souls are often parched. But we do understand weak hands and feeble knees. We do understand not feeling safe on the roads. We do understand longing for the place of safety. And we do understand longing for a place to sing with joy.

If you are like me, you are a solo singer. I don't mean accomplished enough to sing a solo. I mean a singer who wants to be sure he is completely alone before he sings! Yet here is Isaiah describing all of us, the ransomed ones, the ones purchased with a price, coming home, singing for joy. Now that's a storm front you just might want to meet. Someday. It is a nice dream to have. It's more than a dream, a vision; no, a promise. Or more? Jesus seemed to think so. More than a dream, more than a promise.

More than someday, more than a promise. But what could be more? We can't claim that all is well, can we? We can't shut our eyes to all that is wrong in the world, can we? We Christians can't live wearing rose-colored glasses, trying to convince everyone and ourselves that things are better than they are, can we? No. Of course not. Notice what Jesus tells John's disciples when they come and ask if it is true, if he is true. John has fallen on hard times; he is in jail, about to lose his head to a capricious king trying to seduce his stepdaughter. Does he really begin to doubt, or is he still trying to teach his followers? Who knows? But you can't blame him if his faith was beginning to grow a little dim in that dungeon. What was so certain on the banks of the Jordan River now seems like a fading mirage in this desert prison. What was comforting and warming and sustaining then is now flimsy protection in the face of the coming storm. It is understandable. And give him credit, rather than simply giving up, he asks. He sends out one more shaft of hope, trying to pierce the gloom: "Are you he?"

We are never told whether the disciples went back with the response. We don't get to see how he took the news in that hole of a cell, damp and dank and infested with crawling doubts. I wonder if he began to sing. I wonder if he felt safe on the road he was traveling, even knowing the immediate destination was likely to be painful. I wonder how he received the news.

And what did Jesus say in response to the heartfelt prayer from prison? As usual, he didn't answer directly. As usual, he asked for input; he asked for connection. As usual, he asked for commitment. "What do you see?" Jesus doesn't ask us to close our eyes to the realities of the world. We are not, as Christians, asked to live blindly, hunkered down against the storm that rages all around us. No, Jesus says, "Open your eyes." Open them wide enough to really see, to see truth.

What do you see? Surely, the storm is there; the winds blow, and the rain and the snow and the sleet fall, driving us down, off the road at times, hunkered down, angry, afraid, lost, alone. But is that all? Look again. Look deeper. Look farther or higher. See the blind receive sight, the lame walk, the outcast welcomed home, the broken - broken hearts, broken promises, broken hopes - healed. It happens all the time. I suspect it has happened to you at one time or more. Reconciliation is real. Forgiveness is healing. There are lights in the storm, no matter how hard the wind howls.

That's how we "get over it." By lifting our perspective over the immediate storm, we can see more; we can see bigger. Jesus says John stood in the storm. He was strong, and he was prickly, and he was a sign that the storm was not the final answer. And then he says that you can do that too. You can stand in the storm just as John did. You can stand up for right. You can speak truth to power. You can call for repentance. You can do that too. You just need a kingdom perspective. You need to see things as Christ sees them—a higher, longer, more hopeful vision.

Jesus says, "What do you see?" See the work of the Messiah; see the hands of the Messiah in the hands of the healers of pains physical and spiritual. See the love of the Messiah in a parent's love, in a teacher's going above and beyond. See the covenant of the Messiah in the hugs of lovers reunited, in a family reconnected. See the service of the Messiah in the feeding of the hungry and sheltering of the homeless. *What do you see?*

There are many more examples. Fill in your own. *What do you see?* And when you see it what does it do for you? What does it do in you? We're back to *Gaudete*. We're back to joy. Joy is not the happiness we feel that grows out of contentment in circumstances. Joy is the confidence, borne out of experience, that we are on the Lord's highway - and not even we fools can get lost. Joy is that taste of *someday* that we

can have if we pay attention. Joy is hope - not the flimsy hope of wishing for presents at Christmas, but the muscular hope grounded in the reality of experience, if not yours, then his. *What do you see?*

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

Call to Worship

Beloved, we gather to rejoice in God who does wondrous things, who promises that someday all manner of things shall be well.

We rejoice in the truth of the day that all the earth awaits.

We worship with joy now, confident that God will not stop until all creation is at peace.

We rejoice in the truth of the day that all the earth awaits.

We lift up our voices in song and story, in prayer and praise, as we remember and rejoice in all that God has done and will do among us.

We rejoice in the truth of the day that all the earth awaits.

Come! Let us worship God with joy as we work with God toward the day when all of creation lives in everlasting joy.

Come! Let us rejoice in the truth of the day that all the earth awaits.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, May 2025.

Prayer for the Day

Holy God of Joy,

We rejoice in the reality of who you are.

We live within the joy of your love for us.

Our contentment comes and goes.

Our happiness ebbs and flows.

Our feelings depend upon our circumstances,

our physical health, our brain chemistry.

But our joy is deeply rooted

in our identity as your beloved children.

And we give you thanks. Amen.

Written by Joanna Harader and posted on Spacious Faith, <http://spaciousfaith.com/>. Reposted on the re:Worship blog at <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2015/12/call-to-worship-prayer-for-advent.html>.

Prayer of Confession

We gather together in this season of Advent
anticipating hope, praying for peace, attempting to cultivate joy and share love
amidst commotion, grief, despair and uncertainty.

Moment of silence

God, we confess that we have often placed our hope in
people and things that can't fulfill our every need.
We have searched for peace in shallow places.
We have mistaken joy for temporal pleasure and artificial exhilaration.
We have put limits on the ways we love,
excluding those who need our loving kindness the most.
God, when we have lost our way, show us yours.
Guide us to the hope in you that will renew our strength.
Lead us to your peace that transcends all understanding.
Fill us with a joy we can only experience in your presence.
Remind us that you have always loved us with an everlasting love,
so that we may share that love with others. Amen.

Words of Assurance

In this season of desolation and uncertainty, it is good to know that
God's love for us is sure—that God's commitment to us is definite—that God is guiding us as the
compassionate companions that we are called to be for each other.
Let us live into this gift.
Amen.

Written by Rev. Mia M. McClain, senior pastor of Riverside Baptist Church in Washington D.C. Posted on the Worship Ways website at <https://www.ucc.org/worship-way/advent-3a-december-11/>.

Benediction

Advent people, go now in the blessing of God's joy, confident that the day we await is close at hand and ready to cooperate with God in building the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, June 2025.

CANDLE-LIGHTING LITURGY

First Reader: In the midst of our waiting and longing for God to make the world right again, we cling to the truth that God has saved, God is saving, and God will save. So today, we join our voices with the prophet Isaiah, who calls us to live in the joy of the truth of God's salvation.

All: We choose to believe that the day is coming when “the ransomed of the LORD shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away” (Isaiah 35:10).

Second Reader: We light this candle of joy as a sign of the Truth that sets us free to live in joy as we wait and work for the day when all creation will flourish together.

Light the third candle (pink) of the Advent wreath.

Fourth Sunday of Advent – Signs and Faithfulness

December 21, 2025

[Matthew 1:18-25](#)

Color – Blue or Purple

PLANNING NOTES

Mary is pregnant; Joseph comes up with a contingency plan, and an angel throws new information into the mix that changes everything. Do you feel the frenzy in the story? That underlying sense that if one thing goes wrong, the entire narrative will erupt into chaos? Or is that just the Christmas Eve anxiety seeping in?

In these last few days before Christmas Eve, we, like Joseph, receive a call to faithfulness, to notice the signs before us, listen to the messengers among us, and follow. We must wonder when the significance of the choice to believe and follow the angel's directions sank in with Joseph. Clearly, he acted immediately, but when did the action gain meaning for him, for Mary, for the world?

In the Northern Hemisphere, this Sunday is also the longest night of the year, a time when many communities offer a Blue Christmas or Longest Night service. This year, consider how the themes of Blue Christmas might also be incorporated into the Sunday morning service. What does faithfulness look like in the face of grief? How do we follow the signs God gives us when our hearts are heavy with sadness? How does God dwell among us in the midst of the heartbreak in our individual lives, our communities, and our world? Perhaps the greatest gift we can give, the best answer we can offer to these hard questions, is the opportunity to rest in love and compassion, to pray together without insisting that we must be happy and carefree. The joy of last week does not negate the difficulty of living faithfully in a broken world. On this final Sunday of Advent, place an angel on the altar. Light the candle of love. Pray for the hurts of the world. Encourage one another to faithfulness with the assurance that God will guide us, like Joseph, with signs and messengers to live ready to welcome Emmanuel, God with us.

PREACHING NOTES

Joseph had a plan. He was well into it when it all went off the rails. He was betrothed to Mary. The romantics among us would like it to be a love story, a first glance, head over heels story, and that Joseph worked and planned and organized himself into this almost-to-be wedding. Could be. The historians among us point out that many, if not most, marriages in those days were arranged by parents and family members. It had been worked out by Mary's dad and Joseph or Joseph's father. But it happened; documents were signed and handshakes exchanged; it was a done deal, a plan on its way. Traditionalists have been troubled by Joseph's disappearance from the story so quickly, so they invented a story that accounts for it. He was older, maybe even a widower, with kids (which also explains those pesky references to Jesus' brothers and sisters – they were half siblings, thus preserving Mary's perpetual virginity), and to fill his emptiness, to comfort his loneliness, young Mary was given to older Joseph, and thus the plan was in place.

The truth is, we don't know. What we know, because Matthew tells us, is that there was a plan: "When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph." That was the plan, a wedding on the way. But like many plans, it met an obstacle: "She was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit." Um, what? Well,

Matthew knows more here than Joseph does, more than anyone does. There is an interruption to the plan, an interruption of the plan that is so severe that the plan cannot continue. This isn't a bump in the road; it is a dead end, a non-starter. It just can't be. A whole new plan is called for now. A whole new approach, a whole new relationship, a whole new way of treating the one who drove the plan off the side of the mountain.

When we join the story, Joseph is finishing Plan B. What now? That was the question that had occupied his thinking for who knows how long. We aren't told how Joseph learned that Plan A wasn't going to work. All Matthew says is that Mary was found to be with child. Who found her? How was she found? Does this mean Mary told him? Just out of the blue, like Luke says, she found out, "Hey Joseph, you'll never believe...!" Or did others find out? Rumors, gossip. Were fingers pointed and whispers savored in the village they called home? Did someone run up to Joseph and say, "I hate to be the bearer of bad news but ..."? We don't know. Somehow Joseph knew and had to go back to the planning table and decide. Others argue it is simply a literary device, a way of getting what Matthew knows to the readers and to Joseph in the story. It's not an event; it's a sign—a sign that change is on the way.

It wasn't easy. There is a dilemma hidden in verse nineteen. Matthew lays out the problem this way: "Joseph was a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace." Most folks would read part one of that verse as Joseph being a studious observer of the law. Righteousness was all about obedience to the practices of the people of God, following the rules and regulations laid out by the scribes and Pharisees to define the right way to live with obedience to God. So, Joseph, we are supposed to hear, lived a life of obedience to the law. But the law says it was his duty to expose Mary and the sin she committed to the community, so she could be punished, driven out, stoned to death. That was the law. There's some debate whether, by this time, they were still stoning, but they were certainly shunning. She was supposed to be disgraced. *Supposed to be*. It was the only way to make sure the shame didn't fall on him and his name and his family. He had to do this thing he didn't want to do.

But he chose not to. Plan B was to "dismiss her quietly" and send her home to her family. Embarrassed, but not shamed because he wasn't going to say why. That's the "quietly" bit. Tear up the contract; send her home. It's over. That was not quite legal in the strict sense, but it was the plan. Having decided, he went to bed to try to sleep. And he did, somehow.

Because he dreamed. He dreamed of an angel. We're supposed to hear an echo in this. Joseph, the dreamer, like his ancestor, Joseph the dreamer, who dreamed himself a principedom in Egypt, who dreamed himself out of and then back into the favor of his family. Now, descendant Joseph dreams a new plan and his place in that plan—Plan C that sounds oddly like Plan A. But it is Plan A redefined; Plan A resurrected, ascended, intensified. The angel changes everything back to how it was before. Just as with the scenes with Clarence in *It's a Wonderful Life*, after the dream, it all goes back to the way it was, but now it's different—exactly the same, but different.

Because Joseph is different. He's aware of God's presence, for one thing. He's aware that he is a part of a plan he can't imagine, let alone see. He is blessed by an invitation to come alongside the redemption of history itself, the transformation of the world. Joseph's Plan A was to get married, raise a family, and do the best he could with what he had. God's reinterpretation of Plan A was for Joseph to get married and raise a family and be a part of the salvation of the world, to join in bringing life-abundant, eternal life - into the world. Joseph was invited to be a sign of faithfulness, to live his righteousness in a risky but

person-centered way. Through him, we can all see the way to faithful living—setting oneself aside long enough to hear the invitation of an angel.

I think angels are singing all the time. I think they are telling us that God is present, within reach, right here, born again in us, between us. But we've stopped listening. We've resolved to dismiss the Christ quietly, covered up with our busyness and our distractions, making our lists and hunting for the right gift that will make this Christmas special. The angel says, "It's already special. You can't make it any more special than God has made it. All you have to do is name it. All you have to do is receive it and make it yours. Make it you."

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

Call to Worship

Beloved, God calls to us—like Joseph—through angels and messengers, inviting us to listen for the Spirit's guidance in the midst of half-truths and distractions.

We listen faithfully for the day that all the earth awaits.

Sometimes, angels surprise us (as they did Mary) with good news too fantastical to believe and yet too real—realer than real—to ignore.

We listen faithfully for the day that all the earth awaits.

For generations, God has sent signs of God's coming kingdom in unexpected places—the birth of a child, the wisdom of the lowly, the faithfulness of a carpenter.

We listen faithfully for the day that all the earth awaits.

Come! Let us worship God who calls out to us, inviting us to faithfulness as we watch, wait, and work for the day when the whole world knows the abundant love and grace of Emmanuel, God-with-us.

Come! Let us worship as we listen faithfully for the day that all the earth awaits.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, May 2025.

Prayer of Intercession

Into our troubles and weaknesses,

Into the barren places of our souls, come, Lord,

Come down, come in, come among us and make us whole.

Into the war-torn and the refugee,

Into those who live in conflict, come, Lord,

Come down, come in, come among us and make us whole.

Into the homeless and the unemployed,

Into those who feel abandoned, come, Lord,

Come down, come in, come among us and make us whole.

Into the sick and the disabled,

Into those with Ebola and with cancer, come, Lord.

Come down, come in, come among us and make us whole.

Into the poor and the starving,

Into those who are oppressed or abused, come, Lord.

Come down, come in, come among us and make us whole.

Into the lives of loved ones,

Into those from whom we are estranged, come, Lord,

Come down, come in, come among us and make us whole.

Into our joys and celebrations,

Into our work and our achievements, come, Lord

Come down, come in, come among us and make us whole.

O Christ, we long for your coming. Hasten that day when those who seek you in every nation will come from the east and the west, from the north and the south, and sit at the table in your kingdom. Hasten the day when your kingdom will come in all its glory, and suffering and pain and sickness and oppression and death will be overcome forever. Hasten the day when we will be resurrected as a great multicultural family and live in peace, harmony, joy, and love together in your kingdom.

Written by Christine Sine on Godspace. Re-posted on the re:Worship website at <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2015/12/advent-intercessions.html>.

Prayer of Confession

O Holy God of Promise,
we so often place our trust in the things we can see,
and touch, and easily believe.
But you did not ask us to believe what is easy;
you have asked us to believe what is true!
Forgive us, Holy One, when we doubt the ways you work.
Forgive us when we find it hard to believe an ancient story.
Forgive us when we question how you chose to enter the world,
born as one of us.
Forgive our lack of faith and belief
in ways which seem so impossible to believe.
Help us to look in faith, open our belief, and set aside our doubts
that you sent your Son, born of a virgin –
the one who has come to set us all free.
We offer these prayers in the name of your Son,
Emmanuel, God with us. Amen.

Written by Rev. Jan Brooks, Cottonwood Falls Presbyterian Church. Reposted on the re:Worship blog at <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2017/12/advent-prayer-of-confession.html>.

Benediction

Advent people, go now in the blessing of God to watch and wait, ready to receive the angels among us
and to faithfully follow where God leads. Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, May 2025.

CANDLE-LIGHTING LITURGY

First Reader: Today, we come face to face with the scandal of Advent: Mary, the unmarried mother; God Incarnate growing in Mary's womb as a vulnerable baby; Joseph contemplating leaving Mary because of her pregnancy; God's love at work in ways that society and propriety could not understand; God calling Mary and Joseph to faithfulness despite the fear of disgrace.

All: With Mary and Joseph, we choose to wait, watch, and listen for the way of Love instead of responding in fear to the world's judgment.

Second Reader: We light this candle of love as a sign of our faithfulness as we seek, find, and follow Emmanuel, God with us.

Light the fourth candle of the Advent wreath.

Christmas Eve – Signs and Glory

December 24, 2025

[Luke 2:1-14, \(15-20\)](#)

Color – White or Gold

PLANNING NOTES

Christmas Eve has arrived! The Advent wreath is ready; the candles are waiting to be lit; the familiar carols are ready to be sung. This is a worship service (or services) to relish in the traditions of this day. This is the time to bring in the familiar rituals, stories, and songs that have shaped your community's worship for years upon years, as you welcome the Christ child. And, at the same time, every year, we tell the story a bit differently. We come to worship at the foot of the manger carrying a little more sorrow, happiness, anxiety, or contentment than we did the year before. We come to the same story year after year to encounter it anew because of how we have changed as individuals and communities.

This year, we have extended the “signs and...” theme into Christmas Eve and Christmastide. If Advent is about the “already and not yet” of God's kingdom, then even in the celebration of the birth of the Christ child, we are looking for signs. We pay attention to how God showed up then so we can recognize how God shows up among us now. On Christmas Eve, one of those signs is glory—the glory of the Christ child in the manger, the glory of angels appearing to shepherds, the glory of God making a home among us in a smelly, scratchy stable. So, bring the Nativity to the altar. Fill the space with candles. Sing the glorious hymns. Rejoice in the answer to our longing and waiting!

Help your congregation notice where the glory resides in the story so they can learn to pay attention for God's glory to show up in the same places today. Perhaps you sing a hymn like “Star-Child” (*The Faith We Sing* 2095) or “Like a Child” (*The Faith We Sing* 2092). Perhaps you share in a prayer of confession or lament for all the ways humans harm the home God creates for us. Perhaps you gather the children up front and let them help the congregation think of the least likely places God might show up so that we can all pay attention and be ready when God does, indeed, give us glimpses of glory in unlikely places. Find the ways for Christmas Eve to not be the end but the next chapter of watching for signs and following where God leads with faithfulness and hope, for the journey is only beginning.

PREACHING NOTES

Have you caught your breath yet? We've all been running flat out to get here—piling up the lists, filling the calendars, and saying yes to more than we have the capacity to meet. Because that's what you do during this hectic season. But why? Why do we fill ourselves with so much during the season of watching and waiting? Why do we run from the moment we wake until we fall into bed exhausted from our too many efforts? Is it to convince ourselves that we can fill our emptiness? Is it an attempt to silence the voice inside that asks questions we don't have answers for?

On the other hand, maybe you are one of those for whom the busyness has passed. And now the loneliness of daily existence, the empty chairs at the table, the silence in hallways, is what defines you, even in this most wonderful time of the year. We might feel unseen or unknown this season. We might feel, well, like a shepherd.

There are many different ways of viewing these characters from this most precious story on this most precious night. They usually get cast in our descriptions as outsiders. Some of us used to think they were lazy, relaxing in the fields, dozing and drinking, time on their hands. We aren't the first to think that of them. That's why they were considered unclean. They were rough characters, kept from proper worship and proper interactions with the "good people." When Luke tells us that the people were "amazed at what the shepherds had told them," we rightly think about the wonder of the story itself. But the added ingredient to their amazement was the source of the story. It was the shepherds who told this story. The shepherds who, according to them anyway, got a voicemail from God—no, a direct message, better than a telegram, a visitation. A manifestation. An angel, a whole host of them, singing and dancing in the heavens, about a baby in a manger. Uh-huh. Just what did they keep in those leather flasks all night long anyway?

I'm sure that is what went through the minds of at least some of those hearing this tale. These are shepherds, after all. But what if we've been a bit unfair to the shepherds? I read a commentator some years ago who said we should see the shepherds as small business owners. Theirs was hardly the only occupation that had to deal with ritual uncleanness; those rules were almost impossible to keep. Indeed, some in the business were disreputable characters, but what business doesn't have its share of disrepute?

Maybe the issue was that they were busy. Luke doesn't say they were lazing about in the field. He says they were keeping watch. It was an important job. Someone even speculated once that perhaps this was not an ordinary, run-of-the-mill flock of sheep, that maybe this was a group of the Temple lambs, raised spotless, unblemished so they would be worthy of sacrifice. It seemed likely that, in Luke's mind at least, this was symbolic, that the announcement of the child born to be the perfect sacrifice would be announced with full angelic accompaniment to those who were keeping watch over the sacrificial lambs. *Keep watch*, says the child grown into a man, *for you do not know when the day will come*. Maybe he remembered the story as he said that—the story his mom told when he was little, and he sat and soaked up every word she said—the story about that night after a long trip to Bethlehem, the night when the stars seemed brighter than they do today, the night when a manger was the only refuge from the dark and the cold.

The night they came, the shepherds brought with them the smells of the animals in their care. They told anyone and everyone who would listen what had happened to them, how they were keeping watch, doing their job, worrying about the predators and the hazards out there in the darkness, worrying about how they were going to get the sick ones to eat and the angry ones to live in peace, worrying about the fluctuations in the price of Temple lambs and how they used to make a good living but now they were just getting by. They were worrying about how long it would be until their next day off, when they could go and see their families and wash the smell of sheep off for a little while at least, when they could pretend to be just like everyone else.

And then the sky exploded. They thought their hearts would stop beating in their chests. They thought it was the end of the world. They thought they would never hold their little babies, kiss their wives, or laugh with family again. They thought all their mistakes were returning to trip them up, all their failings, doubts, and brokenness. They thought what the villagers thought of them would be their legacy. They thought they were doomed to disappear into the dark like those in the ghost stories told around the fire

in the middle of the night, when they are trying to keep one another away because the wolves are prowling.

As quickly as these thoughts raced through their minds came another. "Fear not," the voice spoke in their heads without having to go through their ears. Good news. They heard or felt, or just somehow knew. To you is born a savior. To you. "Us?" they thought. "Surely not, maybe to the 'good' people in town, maybe to the priests and leaders, the rich and powerful," they thought. A sign to you, a babe wrapped in cloth, lying in a manger. Now, mangers, they understood. Mangers were their business, their language. Mangers and saviors seemed to make some odd kind of sense to shepherds.

Then the song began, and what a glorious song it was. It brought tears to the eyes of these rough and burly men used to the hazards of the wilderness. It made their hearts light, their minds rest, and their hopes soar. It was glorious. When it ended, they didn't dare breathe for a long moment. When they did, they looked at one another, hoping they weren't the only ones to hear this message. But they could tell by the look on each face that it was real, and it was theirs. "Let us make haste," they said. They made room in their busy schedules; they made their way, breathless and hopeful, like Moses and the bush; they turned aside to see.

What are you keeping watch over? What will you make room for? Into our midst has been slipped a present. No, a presence. Something beyond us and yet within us. Something from someplace alien to us, and yet our true home. Something that is so unlike us and yet is what we long to become. This Something or Someone is like us, is in us, and yet is still far from us. And that gap wounds us, that distance is an ache we need to soothe, a wound we need to heal. Sometimes, we lash out in anger or frustration because we are not whole, because we are hurting, and it feels like this world is what is keeping us from healing. We look for someone or something to blame. We cover ourselves with stuff, activity, and going and doing, so we won't have to think anymore. Because when we do, we think of what is missing. We think of what isn't ours. We think of the sadness of our soul.

Then suddenly. I wish I had a better way to describe it. I wish I had a formula for making it happen, a three-step process to bring peace, a four-word code to fill the hole in your heart, but I don't have one of those. Because it doesn't come from me or from you or from anything you can do or stop doing. And that is the glory of it. That is a gift. A presence. It is not something you earned, but something you are offered. It is not something you made but something that just might remake you. And there is nothing you must do.

Except listen to the angel voices. Except look up into the immensity that is the universe in which we live. And believe. Believe that it is for you, for us, for the family of God, the community of faith, the body of Christ. Trust that someday, maybe someday soon, maybe suddenly, peace will come and enfold you; it will bring you home. And your calendar will be just as full, but it will be full of peacemaking, peace living. It will be full of love and joy and peace. That is the glory, and you are the sign.

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

Call to Worship

Beloved, on this day/night, we gather to enliven the story once again of God who came to dwell among us as a vulnerable baby.

We rejoice in the day that all the earth awaits.

We remember the stable, the animals, and the manger that witnessed the arrival of Emmanuel, God with us.

We rejoice in the day that all the earth awaits.

We recall the angels who announced the Messiah's birth to the shepherds, those most unlikely witnesses of God's glory.

We rejoice in the day that all the earth awaits.

In our remembering and enlivening, we gather today as people of God's promise, witnesses to God's glorious presence among us in the vulnerable, forgotten, and tucked away places of the world.

We gather to rejoice in the day that all the earth awaits, the day that has already come and will yet be. Thanks be to God! Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, June 2025.

Opening Prayer

We have waited for a long time
for your hope, your joy, your love
to shine in the darkness of this world, Almighty God.
Even now, in our gathering here, we await you.
In our hearts, we still hope that your light will blaze forth,
banishing the shadows of this world
and guiding all the people back to you.

Yet you did not come into this world
in a show of power and glory.
You did not shine forth for all of creation to behold.
A tiny spark –

a newborn baby,
visible to parents and curious animals.
A host of angels –
away from the populated areas,
singing to migrant workers.
A sparkling star –
guiding foreigners to see what neighbors could not.

Open our hearts, merciful God,
to the sparks of your presence still in this world.
Open our eyes,
that we might behold your presence in the least likely of places,
and among the least likely of people.

God with us,
kindle your spark within us,
that together we may shine forth your light,
we might banish the shadows of this world,
we might be the continuation of the Christmas miracle:
Emmanuel is in this world,
God is with us, now and evermore. Amen.

*Written by Rev. Eliza Buchakjian-Tweedy, pastor at First Church Congregational in Rochester, NH.
Reposted on the re:Worship blog at <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2018/12/christmas-opening-prayer.html>.*

Prayer of Confession

Lord Jesus,
This most holy of nights brings us
Gladness,

Grief,
and Joy.

Gladness,
Because you left the splendor of Heaven's glory
To come to a dark and cold world,
To bring the light and warmth of your Kingdom
To a world so in need of
Your Love,
Your Peace,
Your Joy.

Grief,
Because you came into the world,
Yet the world did not receive You.
You came to Your own,
And your own did not welcome you.
And still today, people turn away from you.
We turn away from you.
Sin still scars your creation
And the hearts of your own people.

and Joy,
Because you offer perfect forgiveness and full cleansing
to all who acknowledge their need of you.
Cleanse our hearts tonight, Lord Jesus,
so that I may welcome you as I long to,
certain that I am also welcomed by You.

Amen.

Adapted from © Rick Lindholtz 2008 Posted on his on the tracks blog. Reposted on the re:Worship blog at <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2011/12/confession-for-christmas-eve.html>.

Benediction

People of the promise, go now to carry the story and the glory of all you have witnessed, that the world might know that good news has come to dwell among us now and forever. Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, June 2025.

CANDLE-LIGHTING LITURGY

First Reader: Tonight/Today, we gather to remember with the prophet Isaiah:

For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders, and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Great will be his authority, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this (Isaiah 9:6-7).

All: We gather to once again bask in the glory that visited a stable and a manger, shepherds watching their flocks, and a young couple cradling the newborn Messiah.

Second Reader: We light the Christ candle as a sign of the glory that came among us in unexpected places and to unexpected people, that we may be people who seek and follow the glory of the Christ child here and now.

Light the center candle of the Advent wreath.

First Sunday after Christmas Day – Signs and Powers

December 28, 2025

[Matthew 2:13-23](#)

Color – White or Gold

PLANNING NOTES

Four days ago, we were rejoicing at the manger. Today, we hear a story that, unfortunately, is an all-too-familiar tale of powerful rulers using violence to maintain their control and influence. It is a tragic, haunting story, so we encourage you to take care with how to present the story in worship. "[Trauma-Informed Worship: Guidelines for Intergenerational Worship](#)" provides some guidelines. We want to treat this story with care in ways that demonstrate love and compassion with our neighbors who are young and/or have experienced trauma, for whom the story may be triggering. We cannot shirk from telling the truth about our world, both then and now. Hiding or ignoring the worst that we can do to one another from one another permits violent systems and actors to continue doing harm.

However, in the context of worship, our job is not to give a news report about atrocities committed. Our job is to point to God at work, even in the worst of what we do to one another. That is the sign this week—the sign of God at work, empowering life in the face of death-dealing powers. So, sing the Christmas carols. Forefront the donkey and the angel(s) on the altar, reminders of those God sends to help deliver us. Have the choir or a small ensemble sing the "Coventry Carol," a carol from the sixteenth century that recounts today's scripture lesson in song. Notice how this carol points toward how we, as followers of Christ, might respond to the story of "Herod's raging." Pray for the world. Name the places where "Herods" are using their power to hurt and silence the innocent and lowly. Pray for the Spirit to empower all Christians to be messengers and deliverers of life, peace, and hope in the midst of violent powers, so that we may be signs that point to the Incarnate Christ.

PREACHING NOTES

Here, only a few days after the glorious celebration of Christmas, we might be caught up in yet another struggle, yet another crisis. We wonder how we find space to breathe when something goes awry in our well-ordered existence. When your world shatters from words delivered like a sledgehammer to your gut, how do you stand? When you are plunged underwater by news you can scarcely comprehend, let alone respond to, how do you take your next breath? When all your visions of a joyous tomorrow are spoken out of existence by whispered words of tragedy or denial, how do you put one foot in front of another on your way into the void?

I remember a Christmas season ripped open by yet another mass shooting. Who knows? There might be one happening now. But I remember we watched in horror as yet another well-armed individual destroyed the comfort and joy of a quiet community, tipped the scales from hopes to fears of all the years in a few moments of terror, a modern-day slaughter of the innocents. The echoes from the weeping prophet are all too evident –

Thus says the LORD: A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more (Jeremiah 31:15 NRSV).

It is as if in the world we find ourselves, there is no room for the message of Christmas, no room for Emmanuel, for grace, peace, and joy. The powers that be don't want to step aside for a different message, a different hope. Any time we seek to follow an other-worldly power, the powers of this world will step in to shape that response. There is no room, we're told, for dissent from the social norms we are living in these days. No room.

No room is, of course, a well-known theme of Christmas. How many little bath-robed innkeepers over the years pronounced in a stern voice, "There's no room"? How often have the holy couple gone door to door in the Las Posadas celebration, only to hear "no room" again and again? We know that there was no room; we get it. It was a bad deal, a rough start for that little prince of peace.

But to be honest, I almost moved on to other issues. We are in Matthew this year. And that is Luke's story. There is no trip to Bethlehem in Matthew; they are already there. There is no busy town with a lack of accommodation, no manger, no swaddling cloths (whatever that is), no "no room in the inn." So, I hadn't even thought of the "no room" motif.

But then I remembered one of my favorite songs of the season, "No Room" by Todd Agnew. It isn't a new song. It came out in 2006. But it just gripped me again this season. Listen to it as you think about this sermon for the Sunday after Christmas: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tu3APGXAqpw>.

*There's no room...no room in the inn, / If you were someone important we might try to fit you in,
/ but there's no room in here for you. / There's no room...no room to lay your head, / If you were
wealthy we might find you a bed, / but there's no room in here for you.*

*No Room (The Innkeeper) Joy Whitlock, Todd Agnew performers, Todd Agnew Composer, From
the album **Do You See What I See**, October 2006, Ardent Records.*

The song is a duet; I'm guessing Joy Whitlock is the other singer - the innkeeper's wife. They both sound like two tired service industry workers who don't have room in their busy lives for one more request, one more need to be filled. True to the legends, though, they offer a stable and a manger, and that "should be fine for your little baby." So, a little compassion works its way through their weariness.

A little compassion seems a rare thing these days. Oh, not among those we know and love. Compassion is everywhere for us. But on the world scene, on a global level, compassion seems lacking. It is all about security, all about advantage, all about debts and costs and power.

Matthew's story is also about the lack of room for this Messiah. It is about a world that is hostile to a different way of being, a different set of priorities. From the beginning, the world seeks to have its way with God's plans for us.

Our Gospel for the Sunday after Christmas is a difficult one, but it's one we need to hear. So, let me issue the parental advisory warning before you read the text: Some scenes may be difficult for sensitive viewers. Read at your own risk.

Unlike Luke, Matthew never says outright, "There was no room for them." But it seems to be written in every verse. There was no room for them in a world of violence and corruption. There was no room for them in a hometown ruled by a bloodthirsty tyrant. There was no room for them in a land that was a daily reminder of slavery and suffering. There was no room for them in a new hometown that was out on the edge of where the "good people" they grew up with lived.

But God was determined to make room. At so many points in this event, it all could have come crashing down. There were those who could have said no; there were those who could have taken the life of God's instruments. It seemed such a fragile house of cards, but it was how God chose to work. And this was - and is - the world God chose to work in. Thanks be to God.

To say it is a messy world is an enormous understatement. But it also acknowledges that it is a world in need of saving. There is a lot in this story we don't understand, and Matthew doesn't explain as he tells it. Why not send all the families of children running for their lives? Why not throw a bubble of protection over the innocents who are slaughtered in this story? We can tie ourselves up in knots trying to explain, trying to answer for God's actions. We can't do it with the gospel story any more than we can do it with modern-day tragedies - natural disasters or human inhumanity.

So, if there aren't answers here in this story in Matthew, what is there? Hope. Promise. A Savior. That is what Matthew offers here. Not answers, not explanations. Just hope.

Did you hear a thread in the song "No Room" I quoted earlier? A small opening, a grasping for hope. The innkeeper's song powerfully depicts the burdens of living, but also a cry for help. Maybe it is offhand; maybe it is done with a sneer, or worldly cynicism. But it is there.

Cause I'm cold, and tired of working my whole life away, / Every hand, needing one thing more, comes knocking at my door, / I got a hundred people screaming out my name, and I can't care no more, / You come, needing more when I got nothing, / What can you give me? Can you save me?"

To that plea Christmas comes and answers "Yes!"

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

Call to Worship

Beloved, we have waited, watched, and witnessed the coming of the Christ child. As we gather today on the other side of Christmas, we might be tempted to ask, "What now?"

We continue to wait and watch for the day that all the earth awaits.

In this season of Christmas, we remember that though Christ has come among us, the good news of freedom for captives, flourishing for the poor, and power returned to the disempowered does not reign in so many places.

We continue to wait and watch for the day that all the earth awaits.

With Mary and Joseph, we listen for God to show us how to protect and advocate for the vulnerable among us.

We continue to wait and watch for the day that all the earth awaits.

As we gather to worship today, may God bind us together in love, empowering us to live as followers of the Christ child who declare good news wherever we go.

We gather today as people who wait, watch, and work for the day that all the earth awaits. Thanks be to God! Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, June 2025.

Prayers of the People

God of life,

we pray to you for all people:

for all women who have been excluded from a full-fledged life for the only reason that it has been always like that.

Empower us to take all iniquity away.

for all people who are oppressed and abused.

Empower us to take all iniquity away.

for all people whose freedom and dignity are denied by systems and authorities.

Empower us to take all iniquity away.

for all those who are driven away from their houses and their homes because of their conscience and their convictions.

Empower us to take all iniquity away.

for all those who are in search of the meaning of their life within their own culture and religion.

Empower us to take all iniquity away.

for all those who have to labour too hard for too small a salary.

Empower us to take all iniquity away.

for those many desperate women and men who are at the mercy of the rich and the powerful.

Empower us to take all iniquity away.

for all those who suffer, we pray to you.

Empower us to take all iniquity away. Amen.

Adapted from André Quintelier, Philippines, in Prayers Encircling the World: An International Anthology (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 222.

Prayer of Confession

Gracious God,

we would like to be among those who saw the coming of the Christ Child,
those who dropped all that they were doing
and traveled to worship the coming of God's love into this world.
We would like to be those who cared for God in infant vulnerability;
who tickled and cuddled and comforted the growing child,
that he might know love and safety.

And yet, merciful God,
we must recognize all the times we are more like Herod.
Whenever we, in our actions or in our inactions,
find our own need for control more compelling
than the needs of others for health and safety.
Whenever we cling to the security of our privilege,
rather than advocating for the rights of the oppressed.
Whenever we are complicit in the harming of innocents
for the sake of profit, or power,
or because we fear to know, and to change,
the injustices of this world.

Loving God,
we confess our sins against you and one another,
and pray that you will fill us with your light,
that we may live our lives as true disciples in your name,
without counting the cost.
In the name of Christ,
the one who showed us the way, we pray. Amen.

Assurance of Pardon

God's light is present in this world.

Present in the Christ child, born to lead us out of darkness.

Present in the star, in all that guides us to love.

God's light is in the world, and the darkness did not overcome it.

God's grace is in the world, and our missteps will not overcome it.

We are loved, we are forgiven. Alleluia! Amen.

Adapted from Eliza Buchakjian-Tweedy at <http://sermonizing.wordpress.com/>. Reposted on the re:Worship blog at <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2013/12/prayer-of-confession-matthew-2-1-18.html>.

Benediction

Family of Christ, go now into the world in the blessing and power of the Triune God to resist the misuse of power in our world, to point to the signs of good news all around us, and to work for the empowerment and flourishing of all people, especially the vulnerable among us. Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, June 2025.