

A New Approach to Worship Planning from Discipleship Ministries

This week's notes mark a new beginning. It is a new beginning not just of the Christian Year, but a new beginning for how we go about our work of resourcing worship at Discipleship Ministries.

Over the summer, those of you who read Dawn Chesser's preaching notes regularly have been aware that since the Sunday after Easter, she has been writing on a single lectionary track over multiple weeks to create coherent sermon series. You may also have noted that Taylor Burton-Edwards's worship planning notes have become much more attentive to the role of each Sunday in the context of a larger series as well.

This increased attention on creating resources for worship planning, preaching, and music for worship series has been part of our journey of learning to work as a worship team. With this new version of our resources, we now bring a new dimension to our work. Dawn, Taylor, and Jackson, with our coordinator, Amy Sigmon, are now working collaboratively to create resources that are series-based, team-created, and comprehensive in approach. By moving to this format, we hope to model the benefits of collaborative planning and, through our efforts, encourage you to help your congregation adopt a team approach in your worship and ministry as we all seek to fulfill the mission of our church: To make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

These resources for a coherent worship series from Advent through Christmas Season (Year A) mark the first fruits of this new approach to resourcing the church in worship.

Learning to work together as a team has been a challenge for each of us. We're still growing into it. It's meant much more communication with one another at a deeper level and changes not only in our schedules, but in how we do our work and even what kind of work we do as we have created these resources.

And we find ourselves grateful for the challenge. It has put us in much more direct touch with the challenge we know it is for worship planning teams in your congregations as well, especially when they're just beginning their work, or when the team leadership or composition changes and everyone has to learn how to adjust to one another again.

There's another transition both Dawn and Taylor, particularly, are working into. They've been accustomed to producing new resources typically within about six weeks of the time they may be used. This has enabled both of them to connect the Scriptures for each week with fairly current events in the world.

In this new model, our goal is to publish new series three to six months ahead of the time they'll be used. This makes it harder to put the Scriptures into as direct conversation with current events as in the past. We'll find other ways to provide helpful commentary along these lines closer to the time. We ask your patience as we live into this.

Each of our new packages of resources will include an introduction to the whole series, complete suggested service orders we've developed collaboratively to support the series week by week, and notes on the suggested music, the sermon, and worship planning for each service as it fits into the larger series. By the end of 2017, we expect to expand these resources with helpful insights from other colleagues in Christian formation, evangelism, and Wesleyan leadership so they become not just **worship** planning helps, but **discipleship** planning helps centered on corporate worship.

We hope our efforts will bear good fruit not just for you, who plan and lead worship or preach the good news each week in your local settings, but for your congregations and the denomination as a whole, as we try to do our own work of being united, even in our great diversity.

Your comments on ways you use these new resources and ways we can improve them are greatly appreciated. Please send them to our coordinator, Amy Sigmon (asigmon@umcdiscipleship.org). She'll make sure they get where they need to go.

ADVENT THROUGH CHRISTMAS SEASON 2016-2017 SERIES OVERVIEW

Advent and Christmas are two distinct seasons in the Christian Year, each with its own purpose.

By observing Advent, the church begins the Christian Year by focusing on the promises for the culmination of all things in Jesus Christ. We anticipate the Christ's **second** coming to fulfill all things as a means to prepare ourselves for the celebration of his first coming during Christmas season. During Christmas season (through the Feast of Epiphany), we join the shepherds in their adoration of the newborn Messiah and Mary and the magi in their contemplation and visceral experience of the implications of God becoming flesh and dwelling among us.

Advent and Christmas seasons, while distinct in both purpose and tone, function well as one coherent series with a turning point at Christmas Eve.

Each Sunday in our Advent-Christmas season series pursues a key theme identified in the gospel reading for each week. The themes, in order, are *Watch, Turn, See, Dream, Peace, Word and Reveal*.

Advent 1: Watch: The series begins where Advent begins, with the call of Jesus to his disciples to stay on watch for the fulfillment of all things.

Advent 2: Turn: Becoming aware of the end of the universe as we know it that Christ will bring about, we are invited to repent, to turn from our attachments to the powers of death and destruction in this age, and live out of the Spirit-led mission of the coming reign of God.

Advent 3: See: Once we have turned toward the fulfillment God intends, we begin to be able to see the world and treat others in it in a new way.

Advent 4: Dream: Even as we begin to see God's way of compassion and mercy, we also— like Joseph — come to acknowledge our reliance on God communicating with us and transforming us, not just in our waking, conscious lives, but in our sleeping, unconscious lives as well.

Christmas Eve: Peace: Whether in dreams or visions of angels, we see and hear and join the chorus of the heavenly host announcing the birth of Jesus as a sign of peace to all people of good will.

Christmas Day: Word: In a Service of the Word today, we contemplate the mystery of the Word made flesh and dwelling among us.

Epiphany Sunday: Reveal: The constellations reveal the birth of Messiah, and the powers of this world are revealed for their self-preservation and violent resistance to the saving work of God.

The promise of this series is to reorient the church to our hope in Jesus Christ for the culmination of all things in the age to come, and now in this age to celebrate, contemplate, and join the heavens themselves in declaring Jesus Christ as the hope of the world.

ADVENT I: WATCH

[Music Notes](#)

[Preaching Notes](#)

[Planning Notes](#)

FULL SERVICE

ENTRANCE

Choir or ensemble process toward a soloist at the front of the space, pausing to sing each of their verses.

Choir/ensemble:

TUNE: ABERYSTWYTH (UMH 479)

Watcher, tell us of the night!
What its signs of promise are.

Solo:

Traveler, o'er yon mountain's height,
See that glory beaming star?

Choir/ensemble:

Watcher, does its beauteous ray
Any joy or hope foretell?

Solo:

Traveler, yes: it brings the day,
Promised day of Israel.

All:

**Hark how all the heaven rings
Glory to the king of kings;
peace on earth, and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled!**

**Joyful, all ye nations, rise,
join the triumph of the skies;
heav'n and earth unite to say,
"Christ the Lord is born today!"**

Greeting:

Pastor or Deacon: Glory be to the One seated on the throne,
and to the Lamb

**People: Who was, and is, and is to come,
who holds, bears, and rules all things
now and forever. Amen.**

Prayer for Illumination:

Come, Holy Spirit,
upon these words we hear,
and upon our minds and hearts as we hear them.
Breathe your truth into us,
blow away all that is false,
and fill us with the love
that sets the universe ablaze.

**Even so, come, Holy Spirit.
Amen.**

WORD AND RESPONSE

Gospel Reading: Matthew 24:36-44

Deacon or Lay Reader

Sermon: "Watch!"

Lighting the Advent Wreath Keep Your Lamps Trimmed and Burning

<http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/keep-your-lamps-trimmed-and-burning>

Other Advent Wreath Song Options:

“O-so-so” *The Faith We Sing* 2232

“Come, Lord Jesus, Come” *DM Website*

Prayers of the People

For the Church and the World
Intercessions at Morning Prayer
Additional Sung Responses

Deacon or Lay Intercessor

[BOW 495](#)

[BOW 571](#)

TFWS 2200, 2201, 2275;

W&S 3133, 3136, 3137

THANKSGIVING (IF NO COMMUNION)

Inviting

Deacon or Pastor:

Even if we were barely watching, scarcely listening,
or simply distracted by the baubles of this life,
we’ve been invited,
we’ve been warned,
we’ve been called to get ready.

And for all this we have every reason
to repent,
to reconcile,
and to give thanks.

Confessing

Deacon or Pastor

**Almighty God, we confess we have sinned against you,
against our neighbors, and against our enemies.
We have acted as if your reign were not coming
as if our lives depended only on us and our plans.
We have not loved you.
We have harmed and disrespected those whom you love.**

Have mercy.

Forgive us.

Disrupt us.

Set us on right paths,

whatever it takes. Amen.

Silence

Pardoning and Peace

Pastor

When we confess our sin,
God is faithful and just to forgive us our sin
and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.
And when God lifts the burden of our sin from us,
we are changed.
We are at peace with God through Jesus Christ.
Share the peace of Christ with one another,
and your thanksgiving and gifts
with the church and the world.

*People exchange the peace of Christ.
The offering is collected.*

Offertory**Choir/Ensemble Music during Collection****Congregational Thanks at Presentation of Gifts**

Lord, we do not know how much time we have left on this earth,
but we know if we are still here, it is because of your grace and mercy.

Thank you, Lord! (Spoken, or sung: UMH 84)

Other sung options:

"Tino Tenda Jesu"

The Faith We Sing, 2081; Global Praise 1, 45

Refrain from "Tandi Tanga Jesus,"

Augsburg Fortress AU.9780800654788

"Shukuru" (Thanking You)

For Everyone Born, 13

We do not know when you will come or what lies ahead,
but we know you have called us and will help us get ready.

Thank you, Lord!

We do not know all the ways evil will threaten and the wicked will prosper,
but we know that our life and this world are pure gifts from you,
and Jesus, who first came long ago in that little town of Bethlehem,
is your greatest gift of all.

Thank you, Lord!

We do not know what rewards we will receive on earth or in heaven,
but we know you make it possible for us to give our whole lives to you.

Thank you, Lord!**OR**

THANKSGIVING AND COMMUNION

Inviting

Deacon or Pastor:

Even if we were barely watching, scarcely listening,
we've been invited
to the wedding supper of the Lamb.

Lord, help us be ready.

Confessing

Deacon or Pastor

Let us confess our sin against God and our neighbors.

**Almighty God, we confess we have sinned against you,
against our neighbors, and against our enemies.**

**We have acted as if your reign were not coming
as if our lives depended only on us and our plans.**

We have not loved you.

We have harmed and disrespected those whom you love.

Have mercy.

Forgive us.

Disrupt us.

**Set us on right paths,
whatever it takes. Amen.**

Silence

Pardoning and Peace Pastor

When we confess our sin,
God is faithful and just to forgive us our sin
and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.
And when God lifts the burden of our sin from us,
we are changed.
We are at peace with God through Jesus Christ.
Let us share the peace of Christ with one another,
and our gifts with the church and the world.

People exchange the peace of Christ.

The offering is collected.

Offertory Music

Great Thanksgiving

Presider and all raise hands to orans position (palms up, hands extended to sides, elbows slightly bent).

This is the house of the Lord,
and we are God's household.

You who are clothed with the garments of praise,
hearts up, hands held high!
We are yours, O Lord!

Bring our God the sacrifice of praise.
We praise you with our lips and with our lives.

We praise you with our lips and with our lives,
in our singing and our dancing,
in our silence and our praying,
in our rising and our resting,
in our living and our dying.

All honor and glory are yours always!

Great deliverer, mighty to save,
you have never ceased to bless us
and all whom you have made
with bountiful goodness,
overflowing mercy,
and redeeming love when we go astray.

Your compassion is over all you have made.

From a barren woman
you brought forth a people.
From that people, once enslaved,
you brought forth a kingdom of priests and prophets
to declare your ways to all the world.
And from among those priests and prophets,
you brought forth Jesus,
born of a woman, yet your own Child,
to announce the banquet you had prepared
for all the world,
and by his life, and death, and resurrection,
to open the kingdom of heaven to all believers.

How can we not join our voices,

with angels and martyrs,
cherubim and saints,
and all creatures in heaven or on earth, declaring:

**Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of power and might.
Heaven and earth are full of your glory.
Hosanna in the highest.
Blessed is the Christ who comes in your name!
Hosanna in the highest!**

Blessing and honor and glory are yours by right,
O Lamb that was slain,
for by your blood you have redeemed
from every nation, language, people, and tribe,
a holy people to serve before you,
and rejoice in your saving love.

We remember.

The night you were betrayed.

We remember.

The meal you shared with your disciples.

We remember.

The loaf you broke, and break,
the bread you gave, and give,
is your body.

We remember.

The wine you poured out, then and now,
the cup you gave them, and us, to drink,
is your blood.

**We remember,
and we offer ourselves to you,
our sacrifice of thanksgiving,
our hearts, our lives, our all,
with these gifts of bread and wine.**

We remember.

And we are watching.

Remember us, O God,
and pour out the Holy Spirit upon us.
Break into our lives,
and into our relationships
taking away whatever you must.
Transform these gifts,
that they may be for us
the body and blood of Christ,
and we, receiving him into our bodies,
may be restored as his body for the world.

Unite us with Christ,
with each other,
and with all creation
now, and on that day
when the trumpet shall sound,
when all the saints in Christ shall rise,
and we shall all be changed!

**All glory to you,
Creator, Christ and Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever. Amen.**

Breaking and Sharing

Thanksgiving after Communion

**Almighty God, we give you thanks for this holy mystery
in which you have given yourself to us.
Send us now in the strength of the Spirit
to give ourselves for others,
and call all to rejoice with us
in your saving love;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**

SENDING

Hymn: "Watcher, Tell Us"/"Hark How All the Welkin Rings" (Tune: MENDELSSOHN)

Congregation:

**Watcher, tell us of the night
For the morning seems to dawn.**

Solo:

Traveler, darkness takes its flight;
Doubt and error are withdrawn.

Congregation:

**Watcher, let your wandering cease.
Go now to your quiet home.**

Solo:

Traveler, aye, the Prince of Peace,
Aye, the Christ of God is come!
Hark, how all the heaven rings!
Glory to the king of kings!

All:

**Christ, by highest heaven adored;
Christ the everlasting Lord;
late in time, behold him come,
offspring of a virgin's womb.
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see;
Hail, th'incarnate Deity,
pleased with us in flesh to dwell,
Jesus our Emmanuel.
Hark, how all the heaven rings!
Glory to the King of Kings!**

Deacon or Pastor:

Therefore go,
all you who have watched
for Christ's coming,
and awaited the day
when the households of the strong were plundered,
and the strongholds imprisoning our hearts were broken,
and all could be set free to sing...

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

The Faith We Sing 2072

Other recommended hymns for Advent I:

"Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus"	UMH 196
"Wake, Awake, for Night Is Flying"	UMH 720
"Come, O Redeemer, Come"	W&S 3046
"View the Present Through the Promise"	W&S 3048
"Until Jesus Comes"	W&S 3050

“Wait Right Here”
“Already Here”

Africana Hymnal 4032
Africana Hymnal 4028

MUSIC NOTES

Watcher, Tell Us of the Night

Dividing this hymn into parts and using the tunes ABERYSTWYTH and MENDELSSOHN help bring the congregation into the story. Between the watcher and the narrator, the congregation participates in the narrative of Advent, when people anxiously await the coming of Christ. Because of the sense of anticipation that accompanies this hymn text, it could be sung in a variety of ways. It could be sung as a processional between the choir and a soloist or between a soloist and the congregation. The tempo/mood can vary between somber and foreboding (or at the very least, simple) or boldly confident. It is also possible to repeat the last two lines of each stanza to make the text parallel to the tune as it is printed in *The United Methodist Hymnal*.

Using the tune ABERYSTWYTH at the opening of the service allows the texts to be sung in a somber fashion. Concluding with MENDELSSOHN communicates our shared and joyous hope in the second coming of Christ. The good news is that either tune supports the text well, and you have a choice with how to set the tone of the service.

As presented here, “Watchman” is paired with a slight update of Charles Wesley’s original words for the text we know as “Hark, the Herald Angels Sing.” The slight update is to replace Charles’s word “welkin” with its more modern equivalent “heaven.” Using Charles’s words provides just enough of a change to help draw attention to the text rather than get lost in the familiar tune (MENDELSSOHN) to which we have grown accustomed to singing it. [Find a similar text here: http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/watchman-tell-us-of-the-night-mendelssohn-with-refrain](http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/watchman-tell-us-of-the-night-mendelssohn-with-refrain)

Keep Your Lamps Trimmed and Burning

This African American spiritual can be found at the provided link to the Discipleship Ministries website and is an easy song to teach and sing. The song is quite simple, repetitive, and reasonably easy to sing *a cappella*. Other accompaniment can be used, however, whether it be piano, organ, guitar, or even a simple *obbligato* on a flute. There are lots of creative possibilities in the use of this haunting song, and quite enough even to make the accompaniment different every week during the lighting of the Advent wreath. [Musical score: http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/keep-your-lamps-trimmed-and-burning](http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/keep-your-lamps-trimmed-and-burning)

O-so-so (Come Now, O Prince of Peace)

During the 2016 General Conference, a moving presentation of the status of the Korean peninsula shed light on the poignancy of this selection. Expressing the longing of North and South Korea to be reconciled and reunited as one people, this song beckons Christ to come and make reconciliation possible. This logically, then, becomes an expression of Advent longing. A simple and haunting melody makes this easy to teach and sing. Keep the accompaniment simple and allow this short text to shape the character of worship. [History of Hymns:](#)

<http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-come-now-o-prince-of-peace-o-so-so>

Come, Lord Jesus, Come

Rounding out the possibilities for the lighting of the Advent Wreath, “Come, Lord Jesus, Come” is a four-word cyclic song that uses the tune BEERSHEBA, composed by Dean McIntyre for the song “Peace, Salaam, Shalom” (found in *Worship & Song*). Rising in a series of melodic sequences that remain in the ear long after singing them, this option presents the congregation with a simple way to sing in their hearts, even outside of worship, throughout the Advent season. The mourning character of the melody would be effectively played by a violin, whether before, during, or after the singing of the text.

Thank You, Lord

This gospel chorus must be sung passionately at a slow pace. If able, allow a choir to sing in 4-part harmony to accompany the congregation, and be sure to put space between “thank” and “you,” as written by William Farley Smith, in measure 7. If you have a soloist who is confident about improvising over the congregation, encourage her/him to sing a very short introduction every time before the congregation begins singing. Don’t be afraid to use piano, organ, bass, and drums all at the same time to make the singing of this brief chorus authentic and full. This song is very accessible, however, to congregations of all sizes and abilities and should be considered for this act of thanksgiving. [Musical score:](#)

<http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/thank-you-lord>

Tino Tenda Jesu

Originally found in the book *Global Praise 1* (published by the General Board of Global Ministries), this short, cyclic song of thanksgiving can also be found in *The Faith We Sing* and can either be sung in the traditional Shona (Zimbabwe) or English. The Shona, which roughly translates to “Thank you, Jesus,” is easy enough for any congregation. Pronunciation of the text is as follows: *Tee-noh ten-dah Jeh-soo*. The song can be sung with a very simple accompaniment with piano, organ, guitar, djembe, or a variety of other instruments. It can also be sung *a cappella* by a choir, somewhat improvised within the given chord structure.

Tandi Tanga Jesus

This selection, which translates to “I am thanking Jesus,” is recommended from the choral anthem setting by Bradley Ellingboe, published by Augsburg Fortress. Three languages are available in this setting: Namibian, Swahili, and English. Though written for choir, a congregation could easily learn this brief chorus as well. It can be accompanied by drums and piano or organ.

Shukuru

Another expression of thanksgiving, this short song translates to “Thanking You” and can be found in the publication, *For Everyone Born: Global Songs for an Emerging Church*, which is published by the Global Praise program of the General Board of Global Ministries. Possible languages used in this song include Juba, Arabic, Swahili, Bari, Luganda, and English. Musical

leadership from a strong vocalist is a must with this song, and a choir helps dramatically. If a choir is not available, the melody and harmony can be played on piano, but the rhythm is key. Though quite teachable and accessible for a congregation, repetition is helpful because of the syncopation. Even if it takes a few weeks to teach the congregation, it will be worth it because this song will stick with you and give you a way to say thanks to God through your week!

Advent Sanctus

This new chorus within the Great Thanksgiving was created for this Advent season and, as you will find in week 2, is written to complement the use of the hymn, “Even So, Come,” by Chris Tomlin. Written by Jackson Henry, the chorus, “Heaven and earth are full of your glory,” repeats throughout this setting of the Sanctus, which features a lilting, yet longing melody. The voice is the primary musical leadership with this tune and can be accompanied by piano, guitar, organ, or band. Some rhythmic element, however, may be required to help with the tune itself. For instance, even if a piano is playing simple chords, the strum pattern of a guitar or a light djembe might make the hymn easier to sing. Using this in Eucharistic services throughout Advent will create a cohesiveness that will endure through the season.

Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus

One of the most well-known hymns in Methodism, this text by Charles Wesley is often sung in churches on the first Sunday of Advent. Though Wesley often wrote many more stanzas to hymns than are included in our collections, this hymn was originally printed as two stanzas only. The brevity of the hymn creates both a longing for more and a sense of anticipation, signaling the beginning of the season of Advent. Though often sung with the bold tune, HYFRYDOL as found in *The United Methodist Hymnal*, the tune [JEFFERSON](#) (http://www.hymnary.org/tune/jefferson_southern_harmony) may be even more fitting for this season, which is characterized by the present paradox of hope and despair. [History of Hymns: http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-hymn-expresses-longing-for-arrival-of-our-savior](#)

Wake, Awake, for Night Is Flying

When considering this hymn, many people immediately think of Johann Sebastian Bach’s Chorale Prelude on “Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme,” BWV 645 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VSkz3j9b23Y>), which does serve as a wonderful way to introduce this hymn. The singing of this hymn requires a skilled choir and/or accompanist and would more than likely require its teaching somehow outside of worship if unfamiliar to the congregation. The investment is worth it, however, because of the vivid biblical imagery found throughout the work. A choir could sing this one stanza at a time at various points throughout the service (Prelude/Call to Worship/Processional/Anthem following the Scripture reading), concluding with the last stanza as an act of thanksgiving. This would allow the congregation to hear the melody and join in as a way to offer thanks to God. Here is a [melody/chords-only setting](#) of this hymn: <http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/wake-awake-for-night-is-flying>

Come, O Redeemer, Come

One of the most haunting tunes in all United Methodist collections, “Come, O Redeemer, Come” can be used in any setting — traditional, modern, or other — with a variety of instrumentations, from a solo guitar, piano, or organ to full band. The plaintive nature of the melody serves the character of Advent well. The final refrain can even be sung in canon, with certain voices staggered one measure after the refrain begins.

View the Present through the Promise

Thomas Troeger has created a sense of prolepsis — bringing the future into the present — with this beautiful Advent hymn. One of the best features of the AR HYD Y NOS tune is that it creates a tercet of rhyming lines in the second half of each stanza, and Troeger rises to the occasion, ultimately choosing the timely word “waiting” at the end of the third tercet. This hymn can be sung congregationally, but another wonderful way to add a prophetic voice as a part of this hymn is to have your youngest children’s choir sing “Christ will come again” every time it occurs. Even if this is not possible, have the congregation turn inward, divide the room in half, and sing alternating phrases to one another (One side: “View the present through the promise”; Other side: “Christ will come again”). Hymn study:

<http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/view-the-present-through-the-promise>

Until Jesus Comes

Dean McIntyre mastered the art of simple song when he wrote “Until Jesus Comes.” This rousing, easily singable chorus can be sung by congregations in varying worship styles at various times throughout the Advent season. Use of a heavy, gospel accompaniment is preferred, but it would also be possible to alter the style to a more folk-like quality using piano or guitar. If the song is unfamiliar to the congregation, it will take only a soloist or choir singing it one time for the congregation to join in. [Hymn study: http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/until-jesus-comes](http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/until-jesus-comes)

Wait Right Here

Found in *The Africana Hymnal*, this selection is an example of a “ring shout,” an African-American form from the prayer band tradition found in the low country of South Carolina and the Maryland eastern shore. Easily congregational, this unison song has a rhythm pulsing throughout the song that keeps the rhythm manageable, especially with a song leader and a choir to help it move along. However, a choir is not necessary for this song! The congregation is more than capable of singing this short, stirring song of waiting. [History of Hymns: http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-wait-right-here-until-he-comes](http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-wait-right-here-until-he-comes)

Already Here

Also contained in *The Africana Hymnal*, this song has a repetitive melody that would be great as a call to prayer during the Advent season. It is possible to sing the melody only with congregation or support with a vocal trio or choir on the Alleluias. The song has a short, cyclic form that makes it a wonderful selection for liturgical use. The preferred accompaniment is solo piano in most churches, but it could easily include an organ, band, or other instruments.

PREACHING NOTES

In his forthcoming (2017) introductory book on preaching, Dr. Richard Eslinger begins with the importance of context to the preaching task. At the opening of the very first chapter, titled (appropriately), “Context,” Eslinger writes:

For those called to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ, context is everything. To be certain, there are broad convictions about Christian faith that are proclaimed in a sermon now and then though even such convictional truths are birthed within particular contexts and embedded in particular biblical stories. Most of our preaching, unavoidably, will need to be uttered in the particular context in which we speak and serve. This assertion is not unique for a biblical people, though it may seem like folly to certain “celebrity” preachers and other known and revered church hierarchs who rotate around local churches preaching the same sermon again and again as if context meant nothing at all (other than a few opening remarks bragging on the location and reputation, perhaps, of the host pastor). However, such generic proclamations run against the grain of Scripture itself and are in tension with the striking particularity of those who proclaim God’s Word to God’s people.

One famously debated example of the particularity of proclaiming the Gospel is Paul’s own witness to his ministry in writing to the church in Corinth. “To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews ... To those outside the law I became as one outside the law...” (1 Cor. 9:20-21a). What is being affirmed by the Apostle is not a casual disregard for the truth of the Gospel. After all, Paul insists that he is under Christ’s law” (1 Cor. 9:22b). Rather, as a faithful Christian missionary he aims for the good of others and not for his own fame or distinctive “life style.”

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Context has played a huge role in the writing of preaching notes since I began this work almost four years ago. Even though I could no longer consider the context of a local church to which I was appointed as I read the Scriptures, I could consider the context of my relationship to all of those who read my notes in preparation to preach in their own particular place of ministry. My context was to write for preachers. And I could consider the context of the wider world, because I could publish quickly and therefore work only four to six weeks ahead, which allowed me to write about current events. But now I am writing almost six months before you will read these words.

And so as I write, I am painfully aware that several months from now, by the time you are likely reading these words for the first time, the United States will have elected a new president, the bishops in the United Methodist Church may have announced some decisions about how we will live into our future as a denomination, people I know and love may have died, and unfortunately, catastrophic events that I do not yet know about, including personal crises, natural disasters, and terrorist attacks, may have occurred.

As I read again [this passage about the thief coming in the night for the First Sunday in Advent](#) in the Year of our Lord, 2016, I awakened this morning to news of yet another devastating terrorist attack, this time at the [airport](#) in Istanbul, Turkey. The news is reporting that forty-one people have been killed and at least two hundred and thirty-nine injured. Also in the headlines: [Pat Summit](#), the beloved longtime coach of the Lady Vols Basketball Team at the University of Tennessee, has succumbed to the ravages of early-onset Alzheimer's disease. And a [woman in Texas](#) shot and killed her two daughters, and then she was shot and killed herself by police because she failed to drop her handgun when ordered.

So much violence. So sudden. All if it so unexpected and shocking.

- What is going on in the news today as you read these words from the Gospel of Matthew and these notes on that text?
- What is sudden, unexpected, and shocking that you are dealing with?
- What is happening in the wider world around you, as well as the specific community in which you live, the congregation in which you serve, and the family and circle of friends of which you are a part?

The world is a terrifying place. We like to imagine that it is not. We like to think that at least our private homes are safe places and that we can protect ourselves and our families from thieves breaking in. But then we read the news story about a mother who called a family meeting in the safety of a family home, and she pulled out a handgun and shot her daughters multiple times at close range. Acts of violence and betrayal like this call into question whether private homes are ever places of safety. Of course, I make this comment as a person who is privileged to feel safe in my home and my neighborhood. I realize that many who are reading my words read them from a place where home has never been a haven of security and peace.

We like to believe airports are safe places. But when major international airports become targets for suicide bombers, even with all the additional security measures that are now in place at many airports around the globe, we begin to wonder if it isn't better just to stay home. Of course, I write as a person of privilege, a Caucasian American citizen who has the freedom to travel wherever I want to go, and who can choose not to travel to places where my safety might be threatened because of my gender or my religious or cultural or racial heritage.

We like to think we can protect ourselves from early death through healthy living: keeping our weight down, exercising regularly, eating the right foods, and getting annual physical checkups. But then cancer or Alzheimer's Disease or a stroke or heart attack, or an accident, breaks into our world. And suddenly we are forced to confront the fact that we don't have much control even over the preservation of our own bodies. No matter how healthy we try to be, the fact is we are all, every single one of us, going to die. And none of us knows the day or the hour when our time to cross over the Jordan will come. And again, I must own that I write from the perspective of one who has enough income to pay for healthful food, and who lives in a place where I have access to good doctors and a plentiful food supply, clean water, health insurance, and even a prescription drug plan.

So when I read these words from Jesus on the First Sunday of the new Christian Year, the First Sunday in Advent, where he implores his disciples to:

“Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. 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. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is **coming at an unexpected hour.**”

I can't help but feel that I'm being put on notice. And I am struck that this ominous warning comes every year at the beginning of the season of preparation for Christmas. It seems out of place. And yet, there it is; and each year, we as pastors can either ignore it and preach on something else, or we can deal with it.

SIDEBAR:

Advent: Beginning with the End in Mind

Taylor Burton-Edwards

Advent marks the *beginning* of the church year with a period of extended reflection on the *end* of all things.

Or, with perhaps a bit more nuance, an extended reflection on the *fulfillment* of all things through Jesus Christ.

Often, when we think of fulfillment of things, we may imagine a process of gradual or not so gradual progress over time, with things moving ever nearer to their ideal state. In other words, we may think about the fulfillment of all things in a way that is similar to the way we may think about our own sanctification and Christian perfection, as we strive to grow in holiness of heart and life with the goal of becoming perfect in love at some point in this life.

That is certainly a biblical and Wesleyan model of our personal sanctification in this world. But it does not reflect either a biblical or Wesleyan model of what is needed for the wider world, even the universe itself, to reach the full renewal God intends.

That process of full renewal, or new creation, as imagined by the Scriptures, requires a clean break, or, one might say, a **reboot** of all things. While some people and some systems in the world are being made better, and this is a great sign and foretaste of God's renewing grace, the overarching and underlying reality in the biblical imagination is that this world can never be fully redeemed as is. It is too far gone, too corrupt, and the damage from that corruption is too irreparable.

God has to start anew. God will do so. And God has already begun the process of starting anew through the *first* coming (advent) of Jesus Christ and through the ongoing, renewing work of the Holy Spirit in, through, and beyond those who are baptized into the Triune God and seek to

live as Christ's body in this world.

Advent is the season that is not so much about how we "get ready for the babe in the manger," but rather how we get ready for the end of this world as we know it which that babe's birth has begun and continues to reveal.

That's why we have readings every Advent full of dire warnings and calls to repent. And that's why, when we do finally get to stories related to the birth of Jesus on the fourth Sunday of Advent, even those stories point beyond his birth to the wider implications (and threats!) his birth poses for the order of the world as it was, in many ways still is, but will certainly not be in the age to come.

END SIDEBAR

At this point there are a number of directions you could go with the sermon, depending on your particular context. *The idea here is to move from reading Jesus' words as literal to approaching them as metaphorical.*

- One possibility would be to stage something "unexpected" that literally interrupts your sermon. (This should **not** be something alarming or frightening, given the fact that many people are on edge when gathered in public spaces, and there may be people in the congregation who are armed.) It could be something humorous, like an individual standing up and breaking into a silly song, or allowing a dog to run into the church, or a balloon floating up from behind the altar, or your cell phone ringing and you taking the call, or whatever creative idea you can come up with that would help you to make this move.
- Another possibility would be to talk about how ministry happens in the interruptions, and give an example.
- You might also talk about how a "thief breaking in" could be understood as something that has happened to your congregation, in terms of an issue or reality that has left your "household" broken so that something you treasured has been taken away. One example would be something like starting a second, very different worship service, which essentially has over the years become a completely separate congregation, so that the body that gathers under your roof is now broken into two or three separately functioning parts, and in this way, the church that used to be no longer exists. A thief has broken in and taken it away.
- Or you might approach this from a wider perspective and notice how the household of the world has to be broken into, ravaged, turned upside down in order to change it and make it more equitable for folks who have been dominated by the household of the world.

When Jesus said these words, he was not talking about a literal house and a literal thief. He was talking about the end of the world and the coming back of the Son of Man to judge the quick and the dead.

Maybe it would help to consider the context of Jesus' words. The circumstances to which he spoke was that of his disciples having gotten carried away admiring the Temple in Jerusalem, and Jesus having replied to them, "You see all these? You are not going to believe this, but someday there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not have been thrown down." Naturally, the disciples wanted to know WHEN all this was going to happen. And Jesus filled their minds with images of death and destruction, but ended up saying, "But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only."

When will our own little temples — our buildings, our houses, our possessions we hold so dear, our health, our bodies, our very lives — come tumbling down? We don't know, any more than we know when this whole shebang — earth and sky, moon and stars, space and time — shall cease.

Jesus points out how vulnerable and helpless we are, how temporary are our possessions, including the possession of our very lives. We can never know for sure in what part of the night the thief will come. We don't know when. We can never know.

What can we do to cope, to endure, to hope and go on? How are we to prepare to receive Christ born into the world this year, and celebrate both the joy and the terror that his coming again arouses in us?

We can prepare only by fully admitting to the frailty of our human condition. We can prepare only by confessing our sinful desire to control the world ourselves and ask our creator for absolution. We can prepare only by casting ourselves on the mercy of God and giving thanks for what we have been given.

- Give thanks that we have been spared for a little more time on this earth.
- Give thanks that God has given us time and space to set our hearts in order during this season of holy preparation for whatever is to come.
- Give thanks that our Lord Jesus Christ helps us to see that all of life, the world we live in, and each treasure it contains, is a pure gift from God, who first gave us Jesus, long ago in the little town of Bethlehem.
- Give thanks that by grace our Lord teaches us always, again and again, to continually give our lives back over to him.

PLANNING NOTES

As you develop this Advent/Christmas series together and each service within it, pay particular attention to three things:

1. **Series Dynamics** — Start strong, move confidently, and conclude the series with a segue into the series to follow.

2. **The Historic Seasonal and Biblical Emphases** — What many people know or think they know about Advent and Christmas is far more informed by television, movies, and other stories and songs than the centuries of witness of the church in its celebration and the Scriptures the church has used to inform it. As you work with the larger themes of these two seasons in your team (the culmination of all things in Christ at his second coming and contemplation and praise for the implications of God’s incarnation in Christ), be sure to call particular attention to what the Scriptures themselves say and, where needed, do not say. Use this series as an opportunity to help clear the muddle the wider culture makes of these seasons and to celebrate and ponder anew the wonders God has actually promised and given.

3. **What’s Happening Now** in the life of your congregation, your local community, The United Methodist Church, your nation, and the wider world. Ours is an incarnational faith, not a theoretical one. While we seek to live as a holy people who are not “of the world,” we are called to live precisely in it exactly as it is. Give attention to these matters not only in your preaching and singing, but also in your praying.

ADVENT II: TURN

[Music Notes](#)

[Preaching Notes](#)

[Planning Notes](#)

FULL SERVICE

ENTRANCE

“Even So Come”

[CCLI Song Select](#) #7036288, Verse 1, Chorus 2X
(Transpose to D)

“O Come, O Come, Emmanuel”

UMH 211, Stanzas 1-2 (solo stanza 1, all stanza 2)

WORD AND RESPONSE

Gospel

[Matthew 3:1-12](#)

“Even So Come”

Verse 2, Chorus 2x

Sermon

“Turn”

Call to Discipleship

“Even So Come,” Bridge 1

See “Planning Notes” (below) for more information.

Advent Candle Lighting

“Keep Your Lamps Trimmed and Burning”

<http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/keep-your-lamps-trimmed-and-burning>

Other Advent Wreath Song Options:

“O-So-So”

The Faith We Sing, 2232

“Come, Lord Jesus, Come”

DM Website

Prayers of the People

Deacon or Lay Intercessor

For the Church and the World

[BOW 495](#)

Intercessions at Morning Prayer

[BOW 571](#)

Musical Response: “Even So Come,” Verse 3, then Bridge 2 as response to biddings

THANKSGIVING AND COMMUNION

Even so, come, all you who love Jesus.

Come, give thanks.

Come, receive him.

Come, get ready.

Turn from sinful ways.

Turn to God.

And make peace with one another.

Confession of Sin

We stop.

We turn.

We wait for you, God.

We’ve sinned.

We’ve relied on our reputations,
or our accomplishments
as cover.

Uncover what we’ve hidden, Lord.

We’ve said we’re sorry,
but then we didn’t change a thing.

Help us truly repent, Lord.

We want to bear good fruit,
to be a church that longs for your coming,
ready for you.

Cleanse our hearts, Holy Spirit.

Silent confession

Hear the good news.

The axe is laid at the foot of the tree.
The winnowing fork is at hand.
God cuts down sin's power in our lives,
and sweeps away our guilt.
We are forgiven!

We are forgiven! Glory to God!

God has destroyed sin and death in Jesus Christ.
So let us destroy every enmity among us,
and rejoice in Christ's peace.

The peace of Christ is exchanged. The offering is collected. The table is made ready.

Transitional Song

Options: Refrain from "Angels We Have Heard on High" UMH 238
"Gloria, Gloria" UMH 72

Great Thanksgiving

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give our thanks and praise.

It is right, and a good and joyful thing
always and everywhere to give thanks to you,
Almighty God, creator of heaven and earth.

From before all time
to the consummation of time
you are the Lord, living and true,
source of life and love
that rings throughout the universe.
Angels adore you,
seraphim laud you,
martyrs praise you,
creatures and people
of every ability, language and land
magnify your name,
and we join their eternal chorus:

**Holy Holy Holy
Lord God of power and might,
Heaven and earth are full of your glory!
Hosanna in the highest.
Blessed is Christ who comes in your name.
Hosanna in the highest.**

Holy are you, Eternal God,
and blessed is Christ, the Lamb that was slain,
seated at your right hand.

For in him, O God,
you have conquered death,
ravaged hell,
burst the tomb,
broken the chains of evil,
and freed all creation
from its captivity to corruption.
And through him you continue
to make all things new.

So renew in us
by the outpouring of your Spirit
upon us and upon these gifts of bread and wine
that mind which was in Christ Jesus,
who, on the night he was betrayed
took on the form of a servant,
washed the feet of his disciples,
and offered them himself,
bread as his body,
wine as his blood,
and commanded them
to love one another
as he had loved them,
as they and we continue to break the bread
and drink the cup,
remembering our Lord
until he should come again in glory.

Sung to "Even So Come"

**Even so, come, Lord Jesus, come.
Even so come, O Spirit, come.**

Come, Holy Spirit,
on us and on these gifts.
Come, Holy Spirit,
make them Christ's body and blood,
and renew us as Christ's body as we receive them.
Turn us and keep turning us until we are
one with the fullness of God,
one in body, mind, and spirit,
one with each other,
and one in the mission of Christ,
to conquer death,
break every chain,
and renew the whole creation
now and at last at the day of his coming.

All glory and honor and worship and praise
and thanksgiving be to you,
Holy Triune God,
now and forever. **Amen.**

Lord's Prayer

Breaking and Serving

Music during Communion

"Come, O Redeemer, Come"	W&S 3046
"What Feast of Love"	W&S 3170
"Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence"	UMH 626

Thanksgiving after Communion

**Lord Jesus, you have shown us the way,
called us to turn,
and fed us with your body and blood.
Now send us forth
to live your way
in word and deed,
and so help make the world ready
for your final coming. Amen.**

SENDING FORTH

"Even So Come" Bridge 2 (2x), Chorus (3x),

Pastor:

Let the Spirit continue to winnow your hearts.
Let Jesus show you the way.
And may the Father's love for you and all creation burst
into fruit-bearing blossom.

Deacon or Lay Worship Leader:
So keep turning.
And keep going
until the day of Christ's coming,
when all creation will shout: **Amen!**

Other recommended hymns for Advent II:

"Toda la Tierra"	UMH 210
"Prepare the Way of the Lord"	UMH 207
"Down by the Jordan"	W&S 3045
"Wild and Lone the Prophet's Voice"	TFWS 2089

MUSIC NOTES

Even So Come

Chris Tomlin's hymn of longing serves as the musical focal point for this service. Mirroring the impassioned pleas of John as he cried out in the wilderness, this hymn allows the congregation to be both anxious and confident in waiting.

One of the best ways to introduce new songs (this one can be found on ccli.com, [video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fBHcvJhc6Pk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fBHcvJhc6Pk)) is to pair them with ritual action. Dividing up the song and singing it at different points throughout the service will allow for continuity, flow, and retention as the song is sung. It also frames the text of the song and the liturgy in a way to elevate the worship dynamic.

The modality of this tune makes it a haunting choice for Advent, and singing it in D works best when paired with "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" in E minor (I understand this may be confusing, but there are a number of factors to be considered, including the modal nature of parts of "Even So Come" and the opening note of each stanza). This is also a key that works well with healthy congregational singing. It might be helpful to note that the Advent Sanctus featured in The Great Thanksgiving was written to be paired with "Even So Come." The time signature, rhythms, and chord progressions were created to be aligned with this tune, so further cohesiveness is possible through worship.

O Come, O Come Emmanuel

One of the most well-known ancient hymns of the church, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" is based upon the "O Antiphons" contained on the second page of the hymn in *The United Methodist Hymnal*. These antiphons were chanted refrains used in worship, one per day, during

the last eight days of Advent leading up to Christmas Eve. Like the original antiphons, this hymn sings of the longing and somber nature of the Advent season. We have recommended its use in the opening set of this service, poignantly paired against a modern expression of yearning for Christ's coming. Have a soloist sing the first stanza in a very legato (smooth and connected) manner with a brief pause on the last note of each phrase; then invite the congregation to sing the second stanza. Remove the plodding nature of the accompaniment and allow the melody to stand on its own as the stanzas originally did — as a haunting, unaccompanied chant. Or for a different approach, play a low E pedalpoint on an instrument such as organ, piano, cello, or bass, and bring in harmonies (with voices or instrumental accompaniment) on the refrain.

History of Hymns: <http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-o-come-o-come-emmanuel1>

Keep Your Lamps Trimmed and Burning (Advent Candle)

This African American spiritual can be found at the provided link to the Discipleship Ministries website and is an easy song to teach and sing. The song is quite simple, repetitive, and reasonably easy to sing *a cappella*. Other accompaniment can be used, however, whether it be piano, organ, guitar, or even a simple *obbligato* on a flute. There are lots of creative possibilities in the use of this haunting song, and quite enough even to make the accompaniment different every week during the lighting of the Advent wreath. Musical score:

<http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/keep-your-lamps-trimmed-and-burning>

O-So-So (Come Now, O Prince of Peace) (Advent Candle)

During the 2016 General Conference, a moving presentation of the status of the Korean peninsula shed light on the poignancy of this selection. Expressing the longing of North and South Korea to be reconciled and reunited as one people, this song beckons Christ to come and make reconciliation possible. This logically, then, becomes an expression of Advent longing. A simple and haunting melody make this easy to teach and sing. Keep the accompaniment simple and allow this short text to shape the character of worship. History of Hymns:

<http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-come-now-o-prince-of-peace-o-so-so>

Come, Lord Jesus, Come (Advent Candle)

Rounding out the possibilities for the lighting of the Advent Wreath, “Come, Lord Jesus, Come” is a four-word cyclic song that uses the tune BEERSHEBA, composed by Dean McIntyre for the song “Peace, Salaam, Shalom” (found in *Worship & Song*). Rising in a series of melodic sequences that remain in the ear long after singing them, this option presents the congregation with a simple way to sing in their hearts, even outside of worship, throughout the Advent season. The mourning character of the melody would be effectively played by a violin, whether before, during, or after the singing of the text.

Angels We Have Heard on High

The refrain of this carol will be an effective way to incorporate a familiar seasonal hymn within the Advent liturgy. Many within your congregation will long to sing Christmas carols, but using

refrains such as this within the worship service will go a long way toward building congregational morale as the season continues. This refrain will serve as an effective way to echo the Gloria boldly proclaimed just before (“We are forgiven! Glory to God!”) and transition into the Great Thanksgiving. Have a soloist begin *a cappella* as a way to pierce through the usual hum of the passing of the peace and call others to sing. A recommendation would be to sing the refrain twice, with or without accompaniment. [History of Hymns: http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-angels-we-have-heard-on-high](http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-angels-we-have-heard-on-high)

Gloria, Gloria

The Taizé Community is the source of this bold setting of the heavenly chorus from Luke 2:14. Many churches are able to sing canons even if they have never tried (think of “Row, Row, Row Your Boat”). Be brave and take a moment to teach this song before worship begins. Another great help to teaching a canon is dividing your choir on the parts and having them support the divisions within the congregation. Ultimately, if a two-, three-, or four-part canon would cause more harm to the liturgy where you are, be encouraged — it is also possible to sing this chorus in unison, *a cappella*, or with a simple accompaniment of piano, organ, or handbells. If you have children, youth, or adults in your congregation who play instruments, simply divide them up and play the canon as the congregation sings in unison. The possibilities are endless!

Advent Sanctus

This new chorus within the Great Thanksgiving was created for this Advent season and is written to complement the use of the hymn, “Even So Come,” by Chris Tomlin. Written by Jackson Henry, the chorus, “Heaven and earth are full of your glory,” repeats throughout this setting of the Sanctus, which features a lilting, yet longing melody. The voice is the primary musical leadership with this tune and can be accompanied by piano, guitar, organ, or band. Some rhythmic element, however, may be required to help with the tune itself. For instance, even if a piano is playing simple chords, the strum pattern of a guitar or a light djembe might make the hymn easier to sing. Using this in Eucharistic services throughout Advent will create a cohesiveness that will endure through the season.

Come, O Redeemer, Come

One of the most haunting tunes in all United Methodist collections, “Come, O Redeemer, Come” can be used in any setting — traditional, modern, or other — with a variety of instrumentations, from a solo guitar, piano, or organ to full band. The plaintive nature of the melody serves the character of Advent well. The final refrain can even be sung in canon, with certain voices staggered one measure after the refrain begins.

What Feast of Love

This Communion hymn by Delores Dufner is well suited for this season, particularly because of the incorporation of the tune GREENSLEEVEs. The text addresses the food, hope, and drink found at the table and beautifully addresses the incarnation as “the bread,” “the sun,” and “sweetest wine,” all “come down from heaven.” The accompaniment can be as simple as organ or piano, but the folk nature of this English melody can come to life when accompanied by a

guitar or other plucked string instrument, along with a wind instrument, such as a flute. [History of Hymns: http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-what-feast-of-love](http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-what-feast-of-love)

Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence

The text of this hymn is mysterious in its presentation of Christ descending to earth because it is a wonderful use of anamnesis (bringing the past into the present) and prolepsis (bringing the future into the present). The fullness of time is addressed as we acknowledge Christ's presence with us in the past and when God's reign comes in fullness upon the earth. Although a powerful hymn on the organ, there are a multitude of ways to embody the mood of the hymn:

- Organ accompaniment, either as written or altered.
- Choral hum on an open D chord (D, A), with a soloist leading the congregation on a unison melody.
- The same hum played as a drone on the organ.
- Even though it is not a plainchant, it could be sung in the same manner, *a cappella* with unison melody.

[History of Hymns: http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-let-all-mortal-flesh-keep-silence](http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-let-all-mortal-flesh-keep-silence)

Toda la Tierra

As with many of the Spanish-language hymns found in our collections, this Advent hymn is characterized by a very interesting melody that can be sung with a variety of accompaniments — piano, organ, guitar, flute, and more. I personally recommend the use of a finger-picked guitar and flute/oboe. It is set in the key of D, which is very guitar-friendly and also an ideal key for these concert-pitched woodwind instruments. Many scriptural images are found in this treasure of a hymn. Singing it could easily bring people into the prophetic narratives throughout the Old and New Testaments and encourage them to become prophetic leaders themselves!

[History of Hymns: http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-toda-la-tierra](http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-toda-la-tierra)

Prepare the Way of the Lord

Another canon from the Taizé Community, "Prepare the Way of the Lord" invites the congregation to join Isaiah's words describing the message of John the Baptist. This canon would work well as a two, three, or four-part canon, and has enough lively bounce to keep the tune moving. However, incorporating a simple hand drum to provide rhythmic interest would enliven the song and also help keep the congregation on pace.

Down by the Jordan

Carolyn Winfrey Gillette has penned a wonderful hymn that can be used in Advent and/or for Baptism of the Lord. LOBE DEN HERREN is one of the most well known tunes throughout the church, and it possesses a certain inherent boldness that effectively pairs with John's message. My recommendation would be to sing stanzas 1 and 2 during Advent. Singing stanza 3 during Advent is a bit preemptive since we have not encountered those Scriptures yet within the narrative of the Revised Common Lectionary. Stanza 4, however, serves as a great reminder for the church in any season, so it could effectively be paired with the first two stanzas or with the

third stanza to make the hymn contextual to its particular day and time. You can find a [score](http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/down-by-the-jordan) at <http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/down-by-the-jordan>, or in *Worship & Song*.

Wild and Lone the Prophet's Voice

This hymn by Carl P. Daw, Jr. is paired with a somber tune in *The Faith We Sing* that effectively embodies the character of the Advent season. Another option would be singing this text with the tune ABERYSTWYTH, which, though in a different musical meter, maintains the character that musically resembles the wilderness within which John preached. The metaphors found in this hymn become a part of our lives, so encourage the congregation to meditate on who the prophets are and where the desert is in your community.

PREACHING NOTES

John the Baptist was a scary dude in a scary place.

First, there was his appearance. He wore clothing made of camel's hair. And when [Matthew](#) says this, I don't think he means a soft, lovely men's camel hair sport coat like you can buy in a fancy department store today. I think he means stinky, rough, dirty cloth crudely woven from the hair of stinky, rough, dirty camels. This fabric was tied to John's body with a strap of leather. I'm picturing Tarzan, or maybe Fred Flintstone.

Not only does he "look kinda funny" (to quote a line from *Fargo*), but he acts kind of funny too. My colleague, Taylor Burton-Edwards, who is a Greek scholar, tells me that "crying out" really means shouting at the top of his lungs. LIKE IN ALL CAPS! ALL THE TIME!

SIDEBAR: "Crying Out"

Taylor Burton-Edwards

The Greek participle used here is bo-w'ntos (w standing in for Omega, or long o in Greek). It's the verb form of the root noun, bo-h' (h standing in for Eta, the long e in Greek). Lidell and Scott's *Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon* (1889, p .152) notes "bo-h'" sometimes refers to a shout, sometimes a battle-cry, or sometimes the roaring of the sea in a wild storm. Always, it points to a voice sounding at full volume and high intensity. Always, it can't help but catch attention in a most dramatic way. And almost always, the person who is "crying out" has an urgent message to deliver, a matter of life and death that must be heard above the fray of whatever else is going on.

END SIDEBAR

Finally, John the Baptist lives out in the dry, mountainous, harsh wilderness east of Jerusalem. The Judean Desert must have been a hard place to live. It was and is rugged and hot during the day, but could be very cold at night. Water is scarce. Very little grows there. I checked the weather for the area on the day I wrote these notes, in late June, and the high was forecast to be 106 degrees F with very light breezes and not any chance of precipitation all week.

So this individual, this scary character named John the Baptist, is out there in the desert shouting at the top of his lungs, “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight!” And amazingly, people from everywhere—from Jerusalem and all Judea, and all the region along the Jordan— not only flock to hear him shout at them, but to confess their sins and then subject themselves to his particular brand of baptism: a baptism of repentance.

It is to these people—people who came out into the wilderness, out from the safety of their homes and neighborhoods to a place of insecurity and discomfort, to hear this scary man shout at them and compel them to confess their sins and turn away from their old way of life—it is to these folks that John first brought the good news: A much more powerful one was coming. One who would baptize them not with water, but with Spirit and fire! This one would not just ask for repentance. With his winnowing fork, he would separate the wheat from the chaff!

So I can’t help but wonder: Who were these people, and why in heaven’s name did they go out into the desert to confess their sins, repent, and be baptized by John? What were they looking for?

For many people, the Christmas season conjures up a kind of idealized vision of the fictional world of Christmas created by movies, music, and a plethora of holiday television shows. The Christmas of the media world is a happy place, where perfect families gather around a crackling fire to drink eggnog under the twinkling lights of a beautifully decorated Christmas tree. It is a world where families don’t fight, no one is ugly, and Aunt Patricia doesn’t take too many pills. It is a world where terrorist acts, vicious political gerrymandering, and the realities of the economic crisis don’t intrude. It is a world where children are good so Santa, who knows if they’ve been bad or good, will reward their righteousness with material goods. It is a world that doesn’t look like our present reality. And perhaps most importantly, it is a world that doesn’t have much to do with the birth or coming again of Jesus Christ at all.

I need to confess that, for a long time now, I have been somewhat of a Christmas Scrooge. It isn’t that I want to jump on the bandwagon to “Put the Christ back in Christmas.” But maybe I do. Maybe I need to repent, turn, and just admit that I want Christ to be central to Christmas. Because the truth is, for me, if preparing for Christmas is not primarily about trying to give myself over to Jesus Christ, the holiday season becomes nothing but a depressing, empty, and disappointing annual event. Without the acceptance of Jesus Christ as the purpose for Christmas, a person is left only with holiday music, holly and mistletoe, tacky displays of lights, piles of presents, and a whole list of unfulfilled expectations.

How do we, as followers of Jesus Christ, return the purpose of Christmas to Jesus Christ? How do we prepare for his birth and coming again, not by having parties, decorating our houses, and giving gifts wrapped in fancy paper, but instead by giving ourselves anew over to the way of Christ?

I suppose giving ourselves over to Jesus Christ begins with God’s gift of grace to us. It is something we feel inside. Some call it a moment of conversion. Others call it baptism by the

Holy Spirit. John Wesley called it assurance. Maybe during the season of Advent we could call it the Spirit of Christ coming into our hearts. But whatever we call it, we know when it happens to us, because it does cause us to confess our sins and turn ourselves away, over and over, from the trappings of this world so that we can reorient ourselves back toward Christ.

If we are to remain in Christ, we have to give ourselves over again and again, all our lives. The seasons of the Christian Year, especially Advent and Lent, remind us of this need and call us annually to commit ourselves anew to Christ.

If we want Christmas to be about more than what the media says, for those who are already followers of Jesus Christ and for those who do not yet know him, maybe we ought to begin by doing what John the Baptist called on people to do before Jesus came into the world the first time: Repent.

To repent means to turn, and then to turn again, and again and again, to God. It is to turn to the kind of life we know we ought to be living. It is to turn to the kind of life we decided we wanted to live the very first time we felt that assurance, that baptism with fire, that presence of Christ, that Holy Spirit, coming into our hearts.

When John the Baptist called on people to repent, he meant for them to return to the way of life charted by the covenant between God and Israel. Many of them had strayed so far from this way of life that when John saw them coming for baptism, especially the Pharisees and the Sadducees, he could not keep himself from commenting that the approaching crowd looked like a “brood of vipers” and asking, “Who warned you to flee from the wrath that is to come?” And then he said that if they were to receive this baptism they had better “bear the fruits of repentance” by changing how they were living so that by their acts others would know they had returned to God.

SIDEBAR: “Pharisees and Sadducees ... and Viper-Babies, O My!”

Taylor Burton-Edwards

When we see specific religious groupings within first-century Judaism named in the New Testament, it's important to understand who exactly is being named.

The Pharisees were perhaps the largest “party” within first-century Judaism. Their primary influence was through the synagogues scattered throughout the region, and their primary concerns were about how to live a holy life based on prayer and God's requirements revealed in Torah, prophets, and writings. You might say, for them, God's holiness was most known in how people lived their lives day by day. Their close association with the synagogues, spread everywhere Judaism existed, gave them powerful and widespread influence. Theologically, the Pharisees embraced a number of doctrines not specifically mentioned in Torah, but which had become more fully incorporated into Jewish beliefs after the exile in Babylon. These include a belief in resurrection, at least some sense of a decisive Day of Judgment, the reality of a personal Satan as a force and locus of evil, and the work and presence of angels and demons all

around us. Jesus' own beliefs and the shape and location of his ministry (out among the people rather than centralized in Jerusalem) were more closely associated with those of the Pharisees than any other religious party of his day. And after the destruction of the temple in AD 70, it was in essence the Pharisee vision of Judaism that became mainstream Judaism from that point forward.

The Sadducees were located primarily in Jerusalem and functioned as the guardians of the ritual and worship of the temple. They also cared about holiness, but for them the heart of holiness was found in adherence to Torah above later writings and ensuring the ritual was offered with the purity Torah demanded. Many of them were priests. You might say, for the Sadducees, God's holiness was most known and in its highest form in right worship. They had forged a strong relationship with the Roman government at the time, and many also functioned as leaders in the government. These two realities — their association with the temple and their relationship with Rome — were the sources of their power and influence at the time of Jesus. Theologically, they might be called much more conservative than the Pharisees, as they did not admit into their doctrine anything not specifically called for in Torah. Thus, they generally denied resurrection, afterlife, and the notion of Satan as locus or director of forces of evil. They also tended to reject much talk of angels as well.

How could John the Baptist have known he was addressing Pharisees and Sadducees in today's reading? Both could be identified by their dress. Pharisees, or at least their leaders, often wore long, blue fringes on their prayer mantles and phylacteries (small boxes containing the ten commandments) on their wrists or foreheads. Likewise, since many (though not all) of the Sadducees were also priests in the temple, they often wore temple vestments. Note how the clothing of each group reflected the things each cared about most-- prayer and obedience to Torah in daily life for the Pharisees, and the purity of worship in the temple for the Sadducees.

Note, too, John's specific address to and then question of the Pharisees and Sadducees who came to him. He called them "offspring of serpents." We might also translate that as "clutch of baby vipers." Was this an insult, or an exclamation of surprise? (See: <https://frsergei.wordpress.com/2010/02/22/%E2%80%9Cyou-brood-of-vipers%E2%80%9D%E2%80%94or-what-to-say-to-people-who-came-to-be-baptized/>)

John Chrysostom, a significant leader in the fourth-century church, believed it was at least partly, if not largely, the latter. Some snakes, including "vipers" are viviparous, giving live birth rather than laying eggs. And the legend of viviparous vipers was that in giving live birth, the mother was in essence destroyed by the babies breaking out of her as from a discarded shell. John's use of this vivid image of newborn viviparous snakes may well have been intended to convey his amazement that even leaders among the Pharisees and Sadducees had come to him for baptism when he, himself, had never warned them about "the wrath to come." As support for this, note, too, that Matthew does not use the verb "boa'w" (shout) to describe how John addressed them, but the verb "eipen," which means simply, "said," in a typical conversational way.

John then immediately gave them, and by extension all of us, instruction about what was at stake in taking on his baptism — a real, vital repentance. They (and we) are no longer dealing with matters that either the most exacting daily obedience to Torah or the purest attention to detail in ritual could address. We are dealing with one who comes baptizing with Holy Spirit and fire. We must truly repent, turn, change our actions, dramatically, else our attentiveness to righteousness in any form will be swept away with the chaff into unquenchable fire.

END SIDEBAR

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near—

Turn back toward God, because heaven is right around the corner.

Turn back to God, because the possibility of deep and abiding joy is very near.

Turn back toward God, because Christ is coming.

Turn back toward God, so you can free yourselves from the false expectations peddled by the media.

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near!

What is the kingdom of heaven? We will explore that more next week; but for now, let me just say that it isn't just the place we go after we leave this earthly life behind. It is the way of living that Jesus came to show us. It is living according to God's vision for creation. It is living as Jesus lived and taught.

To the extent that we are able to give ourselves over to Jesus, that is the extent to which we enter the kingdom of heaven in this life. And the only way we can abide in it is by turning, and turning, and turning again to Christ.

What are people looking for? What do we need to confess? How are we preparing to receive Christ? What do we really want for Christmas? Don't we want the kingdom of heaven to be more than what happens after we die? Don't we want it to be what happens now, while we live?

PLANNING NOTES

In the Series

We're now in week two of our six-week (and seven-service) Advent and Christmas series. Last week, we were warned to *watch* and begin to think about what it takes to get ready for the fullness of the coming of God's kingdom. The second week of any series needs to build on both the overall series promise and more specifically on where you left off at the conclusion of the first service, and clearly take the series to the next level in energy, intensity, and purpose.

Today

Today's readings and service do just that. Now we focus on *how* to get ready since our attention has been captured and we have begun to be on watch. And the heart of that "how" is to "**turn,**" to repent, to change our ways and keep changing them in light of God's kingdom drawing near already *and* in the days to come.

This has important implications for what you will do not only in worship, but as you prepare for worship today. John the Baptizer was not fooling around. The call to repentance in today's reading is real, compelling, palpable, concrete. Make sure as you plan and lead today's service that you convey those realities about this call. To do that, make sure you – pastor and team – have addressed this call in your own lives.

Here are some questions to help you and your team make the transition from **watching** to **turning** in your own lives.

1. What are the people on your planning team, your church leaders, and your congregation and wider community watching for as they consider the Christmas or the "holiday" season?
2. How are you and they preparing for what you are watching for? Especially those for whom celebrating the birth of the Messiah or his coming again to rule in final glory might not be the critical issue?
3. Read Matthew 3:8-12 aloud in your team meeting and give it time to sink in. Read it more than once if you need to. Invite the group to take seriously the reality of the judgment that awaits us all, and what it means for all of them to produce fruit in their lives that shows they've actually repented and are still repenting — turning toward the ways of God's kingdom.
4. What actions or patterns of life do you, the members of your team, and the people among whom you serve need to confess are not "fruit showing you're actually repenting"? What do you need to repent (turn away) from? How concretely can and will you do it? How concretely can and will you help one another continue to do it?

Now that you've gotten clear or clearer about these things among yourselves, consider carefully how worship today and other elements of your congregation's life in the coming week can help the people in your congregation do the same thing. We've included a Call to Discipleship in today's service order as one way to accomplish this.

About the Call to Discipleship

This is what some might call an altar call. It is a time to ask people who want to make a decisive turn in their life to make that decision known by coming to an appropriate place and sharing that commitment or a request for prayer to help make that commitment with at least one other person who will commit to follow up with those who come during the coming week.

Exactly how you design this section depends on your team's discernment of how this may work

best in your context. Some communities may have a tradition of people coming forward for prayer and a railing in the front that facilitates several people doing so at once. Others have no such rail or architectural feature, but have a practice of people coming to people at designated places or stations for individual prayer. Still others have no such practice or no recent memory of such practice at all.

The practice of physically going somewhere to see someone about repentance is critical in today's reading. Even if the going involves moving in the seats to gather with one or two others nearby, encourage some form of movement for those who wish to participate in this action, not simply staying put. At the same time, be clear that it is not expected that everyone MUST go. The invitation to repent in this way is just that, an invitation, not a mandate.

ADVENT III: SEE

[Music Notes](#)
[Preaching Notes](#)
[Planning Notes](#)

FULL SERVICE

ENTRANCE

All are given candles at entry.

Room starts in relative darkness and silence.

Christmas tree lights turn on.

Choir/praise team and clergy carrying candles process in, lighting candles, singing "Silent Night" (UMH 239, stanzas 1 and 3; sing 1 again if needed).

When all are in front, all lights go on, and all sing "Joy to the World" (UMH 246)

Prayer for Illumination

Glorious is your righteousness,
wondrous is your love,
Savior, Lord and Sovereign
who was, and is, and is to come.
Pour out your Spirit
that we may hear your word,
see your way,
and follow where you lead us. **Amen.**

WORD AND RESPONSE

Gospel Hymn

"Open My Eyes That I May See" (Tune: VENI EMMANUEL, UMH 211),
stanzas 1-2 (Sing the "Rejoice" refrain from "O Come, O Come,

Emmanuel”)

Reading [Matthew 11:2-11](#)

Gospel Hymn “Open My Eyes”/“Veni Emmanuel,” stanza 3 (with refrain)

Sermon “See”

Lighting the Advent Wreath (No words — Accompaniment: Chord progression for opening of “Give Me Your Eyes”)

Prayers of the People

Give Me Your Eyes (Brandon Heath, [CCLI Song Select # 5359222](#); Solo first stanza and chorus, repeat chorus all, solo on second stanza, all third stanza, then riff a different bridge with the spoken, “Give Me Your Eyes” as response, as follows:

For everyone in prison, everyone oppressed, for everyone who’s hurting ... **Give me your eyes**
For everyone who’s waiting, everyone who’s poor, for all who need your healing ... **Give me your eyes**

For all who live as beggars, for all who are outcast, for justice in all nations ... **Give me your eyes**
For prophets now among us, for truth you give to tell, for all to know salvation ... **Give me your eyes**

As Christ himself has taught us, now open up our hearts, and give us voice to pray now ...

The Lord’s Prayer

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. (in place of “Yeah” at end of song)

THANKSGIVING AND COMMUNION

You’ve opened our eyes, Lord.

We see our sin.

We see the brokenness of our relationships.

Before we can offer ourselves to you fully,

We must confess, and make amends.

Confession of Sin

**With John’s disciples, we see now who you are,
and we see who we are, and what we’ve done.**

We have left the blind among the blind,
and the deaf among the deaf.

We have made life harder for those with difficulty moving.

We have created more lepers, and cleansed but few.
We have consigned more and more to certain death.
And the poor hear bad news from our lips.

Have mercy.

Forgive us.

**Then free us to see, hear, move, embody, and announce
the way your kingdom is making in this world. Amen.**

Silence

PARDONING AND PEACE

Jesus sent the doubting and dispirited as evangelists.

You are more than forgiven.

You are restored and given the word of Shalom
to offer one and all.

The peace of Christ is with us. Share it!

Music during Peace/Offering

ACTS OF TESTIMONY AND THANKSGIVING

See worship planning notes for details and specific suggestions.

OR

GREAT THANKSGIVING

Pastor and people begin by singing "Jesus, We Are Here" (TFWS 2273), all standing (as possible) and hands at the orans position of prayer (palms up, hands extended to sides, elbows slightly bent).

The people continue singing quietly, while the pastor prays:

Jesus, we are here,
here for you,
here to give ourselves in thanks and praise,
for all you, with the Father and the Spirit,
have done, and are doing,
to save us
and make all things new.

From time immemorial,
you are God,
Holy and Triune,
delighting in creation,

rejoicing in all creatures,
and pouring forth life
inexhaustible and free.

Though we have destroyed your creation,
abused your creatures,
and profited from death, disease, and decay,
you chose to make a people for yourself in Israel,
and a new people among those who were no people in Jesus Christ.

(The people stop singing).

And so, with your people on earth,
and all the company of heaven,
we join our voices in the eternal hymn of praise:

**Holy, holy, holy
Lord God of power and might,
heaven and earth are full
of your glory.**

(Tune: MATSIKENYIRI, TFWS 2273).

**Hosanna,
hosanna,
hosanna,
in the highest.**

**Blessed is Christ who comes
in the name of the Lord.
Hosanna
in the highest.**

Accompaniment ends.

Blessed are you, Lord Jesus Christ,
who has shown us the way of salvation,
where

the ones we blinded are our visionaries,
the ones we paralyzed move freely,
the ones we marginalized are the center of community,
**the ones we shouted down until they could not hear or be heard
rejoice to find their words fulfilled,**
the ones we consigned to death broke death's bonds,
and the ones we called poor are source of life for all.
Blessed be your name forever.

Blessed are you, offering yourself to us
as to your first disciples
in bread and wine over which you gave thanks to the Father,
bread, your body,
wine, new covenant in your blood,
and bid us remember you, and do likewise.

We remember your death.
We proclaim your resurrection.
We await your coming in glory.
Even so, come, Lord Jesus.

Heavenly Father, pour out your Holy Spirit,
as we your children ask you.
Come, Holy Spirit, come.

Come, Holy Spirit, come.

Come on us, and on these gifts.

Pastor touches the bread:
Make this bread Christ's body,
and us his body renewed.

Pastor touches the cup:
Make this cup Christ's blood,
and us living witnesses of his reign.

Unite us with Christ,
with each other,
and with all creation
now, and on that day
when we gather at the marriage supper of the Lamb,
when all shall proclaim:

**Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving,
and honor and power and strength,
be to our Triune God,
forever and ever. Amen.**

Breaking and Sharing

Music During Communion

Thanksgiving after Communion

Refrain from “Look Toward Christmas,” p. 24, [Songs Between Friends](#)
See *Music Notes* for information about this resource.

OR

“Now Thank We All Our God” (Stanza 1)

UMH 102

“Thank You, Lord” (Refrain only)

CCLI [SongSelect](#) #4220833

SENDING FORTH

“Joy to the World the Lord Has Come”

CCLI [SongSelect](#) #3040186

Chorus ff. (Skip verse 1)

Words of Sending (during bridge 2, no lyrics)

You have seen the Savior.

Doubt no more.

Go forth, rejoice, and await the day of his coming!

“Joy to the World the Lord Has Come” (Outro)

Other recommended hymns for Advent III:

“The King of Glory Comes”

TFWS 2091

“Make Way”

W&S 3044

God Almighty, We Are Waiting

W&S 3047

“Until Jesus Comes”

W&S 3050

“Look Toward Christmas”

[Songs between Friends](#), 24 <https://is.gd/LtfAl6>)

“Hail to the Lord’s Anointed”

UMH 203

MUSIC NOTES

Silent Night

Since this is not Christmas Eve, I challenge you to think of this traditional carol differently. The focus for this Sunday is upon joy and the wonder about what Jesus brings to earth. The processional at the entrance to this service is intended to create a sense of awe that leads us to the coming fulfillment of God’s promises in “Joy to the World.” Again, this is not Christmas Eve. How, then, can it work within this Advent season? How can you, your worship leadership, and your congregation best embody this within your own community? [History of Hymns: <http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-silent-night-holy-night>](#)

Joy to the World

While this is often thought of as the grand opener on Christmas Eve, the text truly harkens to the reign of God in its fullness. Therefore, “Joy to the World” is indeed a wonderful Advent

hymn. This hymn is usually set in the key of D for a reason — tone color presents D as one of the brightest keys in western music. Let the brightness of the tune, ANTIOCH, shine as you sing it in worship. There are plenty of arrangements and hymn accompaniments of this for brass:

<http://www.jwpepper.com/sheet-music/search.jsp?keywords=joy+to+the+world,+brass&pageview=list-view&departments=Brass>. Put those band students and local musicians to work! [History of Hymns: http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-joy-to-the-world](#)

Open My Eyes, That I May See

With the theme of “See” for this week, this hymn seems a logical choice. Not an Advent hymn, you say? No problem. The stanzas of this hymn can easily be set to VENI EMMANUEL (“O Come, O Come, Emmanuel”) while using the “Rejoice” refrain from “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.” This hymn then becomes both a core thematic hymn for the week and a Prayer of Illumination when incorporated with the Gospel reading. Because of the use of this tune, you will find that the text becomes much more of a yearning plea than a “sing-song,” lilting melody.

[History of Hymns: http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-open-my-eyes-that-i-may-see](#)

Give Me Your Eyes

Brandon Heath has written a very thoughtful song that can be used as a chorus with the Prayers of the People. Rubrics on how to incorporate the song are within the worship order. Note that there are a lot of syllables in very short phrases, and the tempo is brisk. This can make singing it difficult. Here are some suggestions to help the congregation:

- 1) In your role as a worship leader, take some time to teach this and other new songs. Teach only one phrase of the chorus, and focus on the four sixteenth notes at the beginning of each phrase. The other phrases will take shape after the congregation understands the basic contour of each phrase. (Hint: the contour is almost always the same in every one of these phrases. If not the exact same, they are very similar.)
- 2) When singing the notes after the “Give me your eyes” sixteenth notes, make them more conversational and less exact. Also sing them a bit softer, like the second half of most western musical phrases. This takes the mental focus off of the rhythmic accuracy and places it on the text. It also makes it much easier to have a large group sing the rhythm together!
- 3) Do not have your instrumentalists play the melody notes. With energetic and syncopated sections like this, simpler is better. For example, pianists would do best providing one bass note per chord in the left hand and the rest of the chord in the right hand, pulsing in steady quarter notes. If there is a guitar, another strummed instrument, or percussion, these are the instruments that can provide more rhythmic interest.

Jesus, We Are Here (“Jesu, Tawa Pano”)

One of the great global songs by Patrick Matsikenyiri, “Jesu, Tawa Pano” is a song in the Shona language that is an easy song to sing and an easier song to love. Do not focus on precision in the

parts; slight scooping and sliding is welcomed. No matter what, don't turn this hymn into a chorale. Simply keep the tempo steady. Even the most inexperienced choirs can sing this song in multiple parts. It is also one of the best songs for children to lead in the congregation, so if you have a children's choir (whether established or impromptu) and are looking for repertoire for worship, begin with this one!

The use of this in the Sanctus of the Great Thanksgiving is also encouraged in this service. The three stanzas of the Sanctus have been arranged in four lines, each line representing one phrase of the MATSIKENYIRI tune. [History of Hymns: http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-zimbabwean-song-calls-congregation-to-worship](http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-zimbabwean-song-calls-congregation-to-worship)

Look Toward Christmas

Shirley Erena Murray has written a joyous hymn connecting the dots between Advent and Christmas, and this hymn can be found with a tune by Carlton R. Young in the recent collection, *Songs between Friends*, published by GIA Publications (https://www.giamusic.com/search_details.cfm?title_id=28621). The rousing chorus of "Sing alleluia!" would be a wonderful way to introduce this selection to your congregation. Allow the choir and/or soloist to sing the first stanza and have the choir sing the refrain. Follow with the congregation on the stanzas and refrains with additions of instruments on each successive stanza. The last time through, sing the refrain twice. Ending on a V chord creates an unfulfilled sense of anticipation, which is a timely way to fuel this sense of anticipation in others.

Now Thank We All Our God

If this chorale is chosen as an act of thanksgiving following Communion, I would recommend singing only stanza 3 as a way to transition into the acts of sending forth. This particular stanza is a doxological expression of thankfulness that connects the Advent elements of reflection, promise, and fulfillment to come. Recommended accompaniment would be organ or piano, although a unison melody with a band and fewer, less frequent chord changes is also possible. [History of Hymns: http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-now-thank-we-all-our-god](http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-now-thank-we-all-our-god)
[Score with melody and chords only: http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/now-thank-we-all-our-god](http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/now-thank-we-all-our-god)

Thank You, Lord

Using the repetitive refrain from this song is a simple, effective way of offering thanks to God in a variety of styles of worship. The short chorus can be easily accompanied by piano, guitar, or band. Using this song may be an effective transition in your setting to the song of sending forth, "Joy to the World, the Lord Has Come." The styles easily merge together, and moving from the key of F (suggested for this song) to C (suggested for the next song) is a relatively easy key transition for most bands.

Joy to the World, The Lord Has Come

This reimagination of the Isaac Watts text is an effective way to bookend this service with the traditional setting sung at the beginning. The recommended liturgical use in this service is singing the chorus only. It is easily accompanied by piano, guitar, or band. One thing to note: if using CCLI SongSelect as the source, the first beat of the chorus is actually a rest (The “joy” on the first beat is the conclusion of each stanza). Invite the congregation to begin singing on beat 2 of the chorus.

The King of Glory Comes

An Israeli folk song based on a dance form, this spirited text and tune are a perfect choice for the joy of *Gaudete* (literally, “Rejoice”) Sunday in Advent. The second stanza specifically addresses the directive of Jesus, “Go and tell John what you hear and see” (NRSV): “He goes among his people curing their illness.” Sing this song with a sense of joyful anticipation, and allow your body to move when singing! This is a dance form, after all, and a rigid singing, either by worship leaders, choir, or congregation, would stifle the movement of the Spirit and reduce it to an inauthentic attempt at joyful awaiting. Possible accompaniments would involve a guitar, tambourine, finger cymbals, or a rhythmic piano. [History of Hymns: http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-the-king-of-glory-comes](http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-the-king-of-glory-comes)

Make Way

The writer of “Shine, Jesus, Shine,” Graham Kendrick, has created this wonderful call to usher in the coming of Jesus Christ. The words are related to Christ’s coming, but they also seem to foreshadow the irony of Palm Sunday, which makes this a wonderful addition to the Christian Year. References to Jesus’ healing make this text quite relevant for the call heard in the Scripture: “Go and tell John what you hear and see” (NRSV). The tune, MAKE WAY, is very singable and uses an echo in the refrain, which also makes this a wonderful possibility for intergenerational choirs. Children, youth, and/or adults can alternate singing melody and subsequent echoes to create a brilliant alternative procession for this day. Sing with a bold, strong accompaniment from organ, piano, or band. Any of these combinations works well in a variety of settings.

God Almighty, We Are Waiting

This Trinitarian hymn serves as an opportunity for praise in the midst of the Advent season. An observation of note is the parallel occurrences of the words, “waiting” and “child” in each stanza. An interpretation of this hymnic phenomenon is the wonder created when we wait for the presence of God to arise from children, rather than what might be most commonly expected through adults. Allow your congregation to see this as a sermon within a song by pointing out the significance of some of these keywords: “waiting,” “child,” “humbled,” “receive,” and others that speak to you. A great pairing might be to use this hymn in connection with the hymn, “Like a Child” (TFWS 2092) by Dan Damon.

Until Jesus Comes

Dean McIntyre mastered the art of simple song when he wrote “Until Jesus Comes.” This rousing, easily singable chorus can be sung by congregations in varying worship styles at various times throughout the Advent season. Use of a heavy, gospel accompaniment is preferred, but it

would also be possible to alter the style to a more folk-like quality using piano or guitar. If the song is unfamiliar to the congregation, it will take only a soloist or choir singing it one time for the congregation to join in. [Hymn study: http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/until-jesus-comes](http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/until-jesus-comes)

Hail to the Lord's Anointed

Another hymn that addresses the work of Jesus, "Hail to the Lord's Anointed," addresses common Advent themes of prophecy and longing. However, this hymn is less somber than much of its hymnic kin. The focus of the text is constantly on the reign of God, which is ever-increasing and without end, and it ends on a key element of Wesleyan theology — God's identity as love. Sing confidently and heartily with a lively accompaniment on organ or piano. Do not let the tempo move too slowly, or the congregation may have a difficult time hearing and embodying the hope found in this hymn. History of Hymns:

<http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-hail-to-the-lords-anointed>

PREACHING NOTES

[This week](#), we find our hero from last week, John the Baptist, locked up in prison. At this point in Matthew's gospel, we don't have any information about what had landed John in jail. The story is told in a later chapter, where in Matthew 14:1-2, we learn that Herod Antipas had ordered his imprisonment, and John the Baptist was being held at Herod's fortress near the Dead Sea. From his cell, John apparently received news of the activity of the One whose coming he had announced. And the news he heard seems to have troubled him. What John experienced when he baptized Jesus had convinced him that Jesus was the Messiah. But now he seems less sure.

So John sends some of his followers to go and see Jesus to ask him if he is indeed the Messiah, the One whom John had prophesied about. And Jesus responds by saying that John's disciples should go back and tell John what they have seen with their own eyes and heard with their own ears: The blind can see! The lame can walk! The lepers are healed! The deaf can hear! The good news has been preached to the poor! And those who have taken no offense have been blessed!

It is interesting to me that even those who knew Jesus personally entertained doubts from time to time about whether he was truly the Messiah. Even John the Baptist, whose entire job, as the gospels portray it, was to prepare the way for Jesus, and who baptized Jesus and found himself convinced in the moment, seems to have slipped in his certainty at this point. We don't know why. All we know is that he sent his own disciples to get confirmation once more.

I think it is a normal thing, even for those of us who love Jesus and call him our Lord and Savior, to "slip" back into wondering occasionally. This time of the year, as we are preparing to celebrate Christ's birth, naturally lends itself to asking ourselves once again why we follow him and what it means to us to celebrate his birth and call ourselves his disciples.

I write these words in the middle of summer, just as the national Republican and Democratic Conventions are winding down. At this point, we have two major party candidates: Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. By the time you are reading these words, we may have progressed to having a single president-elect.

As I write these words, Jurisdictional Conferences in The United Methodist church across the United States have concluded their work of electing and consecrating bishops for the next quadrennium. The election of an openly married, lesbian bishop in the Western Jurisdiction, Rev. Dr. Karen Oliveto, has created new tensions in the denomination. The South Central Jurisdiction has already filed paperwork with the Judicial Council calling for a ruling on the constitutionality of such elections. By the time you read these words, not only will there have been a ruling, but further tension or steps toward resolution will likely have taken place.

As I write these words, I am facing uncertainty in my personal life as well. I am awaiting the results of some testing that may or may not affect my health. By the time you read these words, I will not only know the results, but will likely have taken action.

As I write these words, it feels like so many things in my life, things that I take for granted, things that provide me with a sense of grounding and security, are in motion. The future seems uncertain, even precarious. My awareness of my own insecurity, and even impending mortality, is acute. Because there are so many moving parts right now, I am leaning heavily on my friends and on my Lord. I am praying day and night for the world and its leaders, for my denomination, and for myself and my friends and family.

Maybe it is times like these, times of uncertainty and fear, that cause us to reach deeper, to push ourselves into the hard places and the difficult questions, and ask anew, "Why is it that I have chosen to trust Jesus with my entire life?"

John the Baptist is in jail. We know that only a few verses later in chapter 14 of Matthew's gospel, Herod will order John to be killed and his head delivered to the palace on a platter. It is an absolutely horrific ending to the life of one of the most important characters in the New Testament. While Matthew does not tell us exactly why John is questioning who Jesus is, one can imagine that he must be feeling insecure, at best, as he sits in jail, and terrified, at worst. I can relate. Maybe you can too.

This is a hard time of year for many people. There are folks in our congregations who are facing the holiday season for the first time without their beloved partner, or parent, or child, or closest friend. There are people who are out of work and worried less about how to buy presents than how to pay the rent or the electric bill or put food on the table. There are those who struggle daily against addiction, and there are many who are losing the battle with their sins and demons. It may feel to many people like the whole world is going to hell in a handbasket with the inauguration of whoever is the new president. There may be great insecurity about terrorism, or natural disaster, or deeper economic recession. There may even

be some who have completely lost hope and are terrified at what the future may hold not just for them personally, but for this world and their place in it.

What can we say to those whose lives have left them wondering about who Jesus is, or where he is? What can we do to provide verification that his is worthy of our trust and faith and that his good news is for **us**? How can we offer his gospel to those who are, like John the Baptist, feeling insecure, at best, and terrified, at worst?

Are you really the One, Jesus?

Are you really the One who can save us, or should we look for another?

It is to us, along with the disciples of John the Baptist, that Jesus says, “Go out there and SEE. Go listen for yourselves. Find the good news of Christ’s saving grace that is in the world! Look around and SEE the miracles that abound! The blind can see! The lame can walk! The lepers are healed! The deaf can hear! The good news has been preached to the poor and those who have taken no offense have been blessed!”

My goodness! The sun rises each morning and sets each night, even on the shortest day of the year. The spring will return after this long, cold winter. Even as some are leaving this world for eternal rest, new life is being born into it with each breath. The splendor of the stars in the skies, the breathtaking variety of God’s creation, on earth and in the sea, the glory of mountains and the amazing wonder of each form of life that exists. It is all a wonder. Just look around and SEE!

Look around you, and go and tell your own congregation what you have heard with your own ears and seen with your own eyes. Give **your** witness! Tell personal stories (get permission if you are talking about someone in your congregation) and public stories. Look and listen for signs of Christ’s saving grace in the world and point to them as evidence of Christ’s saving and renewing grace. Examples of his love and healing are everywhere! All we have to do is hear it with our own ears and see it with our own eyes.

1. Who do you know whose sight has been restored, who can finally see again after a time of groping in the shadows of pain and grief and despair?
2. Who do you know that has been limping along, barely able to make it, and now is able to walk again?
3. Where have you seen disease — be it physical, spiritual, emotional, interpersonal, or systemic — being healed? Where have you seen reconciliation occur? Where have you witnessed hope being restored?
4. What have you heard above the clamor of the cheerful holiday music playing continuously in public places that has assured you that there are those who truly do still remember the reason for this season?
5. How have you seen the good news of Jesus Christ being made real for the poor in your community this season? How have you and your congregation participated in making Christ’s love and justice real for those in need?

6. Have you not been truly blessed by what you have heard and seen this holy Advent season?

Jesus is not some myth or story. The love of God is not just empty hope. The promise of everlasting life is not a pie-in-the-sky dream invented to comfort people afraid of death.

The good news of Christ's saving love is real. We have heard it with our own ears and seen it with our own eyes! All we have to do is look around, and we see signs that truly, our Lord Jesus IS the Promised One, he IS the Messiah, he IS Emmanuel, Christ with us, now and forever.

Do you hear it? Do you see it? Do you see what I see?

PLANNING NOTES

In the Series

We're now in week three of our six-week (and seven-service) Advent and Christmas series. From *watch*, to *turn*, to *see* — this is our trajectory in the series so far. We've climbed a bit of a hill, and now stand at a kind of plateau, taking in the vista around us.

Today

In your planning team, discuss the following, and use this and the following reading and discussion to inform your planning for today.

Now that we've turned, what can we see, or what do we see, that we could not see before, or that we can now see differently?

Read aloud or invite the team to read silently:

The gospel reading for today calls us to see people we may have overlooked or treated quite differently before.

Specifically, Jesus calls our attention to people who are blind, disabled, deaf, lepers, dead, or poor. How do we "normally" see them? Given how Jesus treats them, and our own turning and commitment to follow his way, how are we able to see them now? Seeing them in his way, what will we now do differently?

At the same time, we are becoming more aware in our culture of the danger of the bias of "ableism." We norm our world and our expectations for how others may inhabit it on the basis of those who can see, can hear, have no physical disabilities, and who have perhaps at least a "middle class" level of economic means. We treat people who do not meet this standard as "less than," and do not see them as fully able and capable people who can and do have much to offer precisely as they are — if we will but allow ourselves to see that. Not all blind or deaf or physically disabled people need to have their blindness or deafness or other disability "healed." Instead, what may be needed is to challenge the "ableist" assumptions that these people are

automatically “less than” because they cannot physically do what “normal” people do in the same ways that “normal” people do them. Yet they still can do them! The question becomes not one of whether they can function alongside “normal” people, but whether “normal” people are willing to engage in a different act of healing, an act of social healing, we might say, that allows people of all sorts of abilities to live as one coherent community.

When the reading is finished, discuss these questions:

1. What do you see when you look at yourselves as a worshiping community? Whom does your worshiping community unwittingly exclude because you have allowed the abilities of “normal people” to dictate how you worship, work, and communicate?
2. Do you teach and practice American Sign Language in your worship and ministries to make sure deaf people are fully included? Do you make allowance for seeing-eye dogs, braille, and other forms of support to enable blind people to function fully among you? How do you intentionally find ways to include “hard-to-handle” people (lepers) others may treat as outcasts?
3. Do the social and practical norms of your community, including how transportation happens and what folks are expected to be able to pay to participate in social events, give good news or bad news to people who are poor?
4. Now, what do you see when you consider the work Jesus was doing and that John’s disciples witnessed? And how do you see all these people differently because you do?

Acts of Testimony and Thanksgiving

Today, especially if you do not celebrate Holy Communion, consider making room for some testimony from people who are blind, deaf, physically disabled, “lepers,” left for dead, and/or economically poor. Invite each to speak briefly (one minute or less) of ways Jesus has spoken healing and good news into their lives. After each, sing a verse or brief chorus of thanksgiving, then continue to the next. At the conclusion of these testimonies, invite the people to share brief testimonies with one another about ways they have seen Christ’s saving power at work in their lives recently (one to two minutes), and conclude with a final verse of the thanksgiving song or chorus.

ADVENT IV: DREAM

[Music Notes](#)
[Preaching Notes](#)
[Planning Notes](#)

FULL SERVICE

ENTRANCE

Something that moves people into a feeling of a dream state.

Subdued, if any lighting, maybe just a single candle.

Perhaps ambient music/soundscape as prelude.

Almost whispered reading of the O Antiphons (2 and 5) and singing of "O Come, O Come Emmanuel", stanzas 2 and 5 by choir, processing slowly, and congregation, seated, a cappella or with very minimal accompaniment.

WORD AND RESPONSE

Prayer of Illumination (sung by soloist, or choir, quietly)

"Send Your Word," stanza 1

UMH 195

Reader [Matthew 1:18-19](#)

Silence

Choir or ensemble or soloist sings "Send Your Word," stanza 2

Reader [Matthew 1:20-23](#)

Silence

Instrumental on "Send Your Word"

Lighting of Fourth Advent Candle (*in silence*)

Reader [Matthew 1:24-25](#)

All Sing "Send Your Word," stanza 3

UMH 195

Silence

Sermon "Dream"

Response Song Rain Down

[SongSelect](#) CCLI #4243542

At conclusion of song, segue to Prayers of the People (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vcJfI8cGAzY>), chord progressions, light, slow ambient background for the worship leader, who says:

Prayers of the People

It's time to dream again.

Not because we think we are or can make the dream,
God's dream,
happen.

But because we know we can't.

We're like Joseph,
stuck with situations in our lives and the life of the world God loves
that promise us and those we love nothing but pain.
We long for solutions that will reduce everyone's pain, and our own.
We may even decide we have found some
and try to ask God to bless us as we pursue it.

But if we're honest,
we know even our best solutions
fall short, far short.

So we pray,
not telling God what to do,
but trusting God to show us what we can do.

We pray,
not to control the world, or any outcome,
but, as Joseph did,
to open ourselves,
to let go,
to release ourselves and the world God loves into God's loving hands,
to let the dreams come,
and follow where God leads.

So let us open up our hearts,
let's open up our hearts to our Lord,
as we pray...

Prayers of the People (The Brilliance)

[SongSelect](#) CCLI #7039048

Add your own intercessions, modeled on these as a base. Have several different voices — older, younger, male, female, different accents, different cultures, even different languages, if possible, to lift them up as solo intercessors. All sing, "Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy" ... etc. Include a petition acknowledging our sin and need of forgiveness at the conclusion of the intercessions. Fade instruments to silence.

THANKSGIVING AND COMMUNION

Pastor announces: In the name of Christ, you are forgiven. Let Christ's forgiving and healing

peace flow among us all.

The people exchange the peace of Christ.

An offering is received.

Offering Music

"In the Bleak Midwinter"

UMH 221

Great Thanksgiving

We have listened.

We have prayed.

We have been forgiven.

We have been reconciled.

Now we're ready to offer our whole selves to God
in praise and thanksgiving,
for all God has done, is doing, and will do,
among us, through us, and beyond us.

So lift up your hearts.

We lift them as one to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the One who restores us.

What else can we do?

What else can we do, gracious God,
for the richness of your mercy
toward us,
but thank you,
and bless you,
and praise your name.

For the abundance of your creation,

we thank you, and bless you, and praise your name.

For the calling of your people, Israel,

we thank you, and bless you, and praise your name.

For the truth of your law, and the mercy of your heart,

we thank you, and bless you, and praise your name.

For the gift of prophets, the faithfulness of martyrs,
and the wisdom of all who fear you,

we thank you, and bless you, and praise your name.

We thank you, and bless you, and praise your name,
in our own tongues and voices,
and in the ancient words of saints and angels:

**Holy, Holy, Holy,
Lord God of power and might,
Heaven and earth are full of your glory.
Glory to you, O God most high!**

**Blessed is the Christ who comes in your name.
Hosanna! Save us! Hosanna in the highest!**

If Communion is not celebrated, skip to sending forth.

Blessed are you, O Christ,
Way, Truth and Life.

**And blessed is your reign,
forever and ever.**

You have shown us the way
and brought us the truth
that leads to eternal life.

We bless you, Jesus!

You love the little ones.
You touch the lepers.
You feed the hungry.
You deliver the oppressed.

We bless you, Jesus!

You love enemies.
You touch the ones who seek holiness.
You satisfy those who hunger and thirst
for righteousness and justice.
You forgive the oppressor.

We bless you, Jesus!

Your life was announced
through prophets, dreams

and angels.
You stopped and prayed.
You show us the way
to love, let go, and let God.

We bless you, Lord!

And as for your disciples long ago,
you offer to set yourself before us,
in bread and wine,
your body and your blood,
and called them and us to remember you.

**What else can we do,
in remembrance of you,
but thank you,
and bless you,
and praise your name,
proclaiming your resurrection,
and awaiting your coming in glory.
Even so, come, Lord Jesus.**

Lord God, Holy, Almighty,
send your Holy Spirit upon us
regathered into one,
and upon these gifts
of bread and wine.

Come, Holy Spirit.

As we receive your body and blood
into our bodies, Lord Jesus,
come dwell in us.
Let your dream live in us,
that we may be made one body in you,
as you are one with the Father,
that all the world may know through us
here and now
the power of your redeeming love,
as we and all creation wait
with all who long for the day
when we feast with you
in the age to come.

By Christ,
and with Christ,
and in Christ,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
all honor and glory be yours,
Lord God of Hosts,
now and forever.
Amen.

Breaking and Giving

Songs during Communion

Choral/Band anthem

“A Strange Way to Save the World”
([SongSelect](#) #1170127)

“Come Let Us Dream”

W&S 3157

“I Have a Dream”

W&S 3127

“What Feast of Love”

W&S 3170

“Open the Eyes of My Heart”

W&S 3008

Thanksgiving after Communion

“I Thank You, Jesus”

W&S 3037

SENDING FORTH

Sung to “I Thank You, Jesus”

Now send us, Jesus,
Now send us, Jesus,
Now send us, Jesus,
Now send us, Lord.

O, for you’ve brought us,
Yes, you’ve brought us,
You’ve brought us a mighty long way,
A mighty long way!

And keep us dreaming,
Yes, keep us dreaming,
O, keep us dreaming
Your holy dream, Lord!

O, and keep us moving
keep us moving
In your mighty,
your mighty good way!

Dismissal

Deacon, Worship Leader, or Pastor:

Go in peace to love and serve our coming Lord!

Thanks be to God!

Other recommended hymns for Advent IV:

"Joseph Dearest, Joseph Mine"	TFWS 2099
"One Holy Night in Bethlehem"	TFWS 2097
"If I Could Visit Bethlehem"	W&S 3063
"Like a Child"	TFWS 2092

MUSIC NOTES

Send Your Word

If your congregation is unfamiliar with this Japanese hymn, using it as a response will take a bit of teaching in your congregation. This can be done by observing the rubrics and allowing a soloist and/or ensemble to sing the first stanza as a prayer. Another means of integration would be having an instrumentalist play the tune as the "ambient music/soundscape" before the service begins. Sowing the musical seeds that come back later in a service can prove fruitful when encountering the hymn itself. Though the mood of the tune is somber and resembles lines akin to wailing, do not sing it too slowly. Written in 2/2, it needs to pulse, with each phrase being manageable by an average congregation member's breathing.

Rain Down

This energetic song of dream and vision encourages us to look ahead boldly as we dream God's dream for the world. This song is best sung by a congregation in the key of B-flat. Even in this key, however, the song leader will have to choose alternate notes during the bridge because the highest notes are too high for a normal congregation. Accompaniment would work with a band, guitar (Capo 1 if needed and play in the key of A), or a confident pianist.

Prayers of the People

A wonderful addition to the modern worship music catalogue, this service music represents what is possible when combining modern music and liturgy. Short, cyclic choruses become responses as a part of congregational prayer. The A and B sections ("You hear us calling" and "Lord, have mercy") are both equally usable as prayer responses. If you listen to the YouTube link in the worship order, you will notice a rolling accompaniment with many different instrumentalists. This kind of accompaniment gives a pulse to the prayers and is encouraged. However, keep in mind that whatever kind of accompaniment is possible with the musicians in your church is OK! Again, simpler accompaniments are oftentimes the best. For a keyboard, play simple chords on each beat. For a strummed instrument, something light, slightly syncopated, but steady is the best option.

In the Bleak Midwinter

Christina Rossetti's classic poem, combined with Gustav Holst's idiomatic tune make for one of the best in British hymns on the nativity. The last stanza is particularly fitting during the offering, and it also fits well with this week's Great Thanksgiving ("Now we're ready to offer our whole selves to God"). Allow this to either be a congregational song or an offering by an ensemble. If sung congregationally or by a soloist with ensemble, continue in the key of D from the Prayers of the People and sing in a lower key than is found in the hymnal. There are also a number of choral and instrumental settings of this hymn. If you choose this option, print the last stanza in the worship order as a connection with the offering. [History of Hymns: http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-in-the-bleak-midwinter](http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-in-the-bleak-midwinter)

A Strange Way to Save the World

Suggested as a band/choral anthem, this song presents some of Joseph's questions that might be inferred from this week's Scripture reading. Since Joseph is the focus of the scriptural narrative this week, offering these questions might be a good way to reflect upon the story, and it might give children some ways to approach the story with wonder.

Come, Let Us Dream

The language of "dreaming" has become a way for hymn writers to address justice in modern hymns. John Middleton has incorporated familiar language from Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech as a commentary on what God's dream would be for our world, particularly as embodied within God's reign. The O WALY WALY tune is one of the more singable folk tunes in our repertoire and can be accompanied by any combination of instruments. [Hymn study: http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/come-let-us-dream](http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/come-let-us-dream)

I Have a Dream

Another poignant setting of the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, the late British minister Pam Pettitt crafted a hymn of justice that calls us forth to work to make the dream reality. To read more in depth about this interesting hymn, refer to this [History of Hymns](http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-i-have-a-dream) article: <http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-i-have-a-dream>. The ideal accompaniment for the REPTON tune is either organ or piano.

What Feast of Love

This Communion hymn by Delores Dufner is well suited for this season, particularly because of the incorporation of the tune GREENSLEEVES. The text addresses the food, hope, and drink found at the table and beautifully addresses the Incarnation as "the bread," "the sun," and "sweetest wine," all "come down from heaven." The accompaniment can be as simple as organ or piano, but the folk nature of this English melody can come to life when accompanied by a guitar or other plucked string instrument, along with a wind instrument, such as a flute. [History of Hymns: http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-what-feast-of-love](http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-what-feast-of-love)

Open the Eyes of My Heart

“Open the Eyes of My Heart” has become one of the older standards in modern worship music. This hymn recalls the “Holy, holy, holy” language of the Sanctus from Revelation and can become both a song of praise and reflection as people encounter Christ in the sacrament of Holy Communion. The best key for accompaniment and singing is the key of E, which also works very easily on guitar. It may be played by guitar, a band, or piano. If the organist is creative in simple accompaniments, it is also possible to provide warmth and texture with the right registration as guitars or percussion instruments provide the pulse. Hymn study: <http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/open-the-eyes-of-my-heart>

I Thank You, Jesus

This rousing hymn from *Worship & Song* has quickly become a favorite in many congregations and serves as an effective expression of thanksgiving. The repeated text, “You brought me from a mighty long way,” is a sung Ebenezer of sorts and echoes to numerous Scriptures of God’s deliverance, including 1 Samuel 7:12 and 2 Samuel 7:18. Be sure not to sing this hymn too fast. Allow the music to swing, which can easily be done in this 12/8 meter. Any number of instruments can accompany this selection, including organ, piano, drums, bass, and electric guitar.

Joseph Dearest, Joseph Mine

Though this is a familiar carol to many, it is not the easiest to sing because of its somewhat through-composed form (little to no repetition throughout the hymn). However, the tune presents a lilting lullaby that has the sentimental quality of many European carols. No matter the instrumentation used to accompany it, keep the inherent sway of the rhythm prominent to highlight the rocking quality of the tune. If your church has a handbell choir, another option would be to play a setting of this tune, such as “The Holly and the Ivy” (which incorporates “Joseph Dearest, Joseph Mine” in the work), published by Choristers Guild (CGB602). [History of Hymns: http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-german-carol-recalls-spirit-of-16th-century-folk-plays](http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-german-carol-recalls-spirit-of-16th-century-folk-plays)

One Holy Night in Bethlehem

In *The Faith We Sing Worship Planner Edition*, we find this “charming addition” to worship with some wonderful suggestions. Use the characters as inspiration to add drama to the service, and have women sing the refrain after stanza 2. Men can then whistle the melody after stanza 3, as indicated in the text of the stanza. Yes, your congregation has an opportunity for liturgical whistling! After all, the tune is aptly named WHISTLER’S TUNE. [History of Hymns: http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-one-holy-night-in-bethlehem](http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-one-holy-night-in-bethlehem)

If I Could Visit Bethlehem

Brian Wren has created one of the most endearing nativity hymns by giving us a way to relate with the humanity of the holy family. The opening phrase, “If I could visit Bethlehem what presents would I bring,” seems to be a modern expression of the same sentiment found in Christina Rossetti’s “In the Bleak Midwinter” (“Yet what I can I give him: give my heart”).

Written in what could be characterized as a standard hymn setting, the tune, CAROL STREAM, resembles one of Hal Hopson's other tunes, MERLE'S TUNE, and easily supports congregational singing when accompanied by organ or piano.

Like a Child

Originally written with no capital letters and no punctuation, this hymn is one of Dan Damon's most well-known texts and tunes. As surprised as Joseph may have been from the dream and the fulfillment of it, we may also be surprised in whom we see Jesus, and who we have to become in order to welcome in the reign of God. Whatever the accompaniment, keep it simple to allow the childlike nature of the tune to support the text. [History of Hymns: http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-like-a-child](http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-like-a-child)

PREACHING NOTES

I love to dream. I especially love it when I have vivid dreams, ones that I can remember. I always feel so rested after a night of heavy dreaming. And I don't know if there is any scientific basis for it, but I tend to dream much more vividly and to remember my dreams when there is a full moon.

Have you ever had a dream that caused you to do something different, make a change, or go in a different direction?

Have you ever had a dream that changed your perspective, gave you a new insight, or resolved something for you?

In the months leading up to the Southeastern Jurisdictional Conference, for which I served as Director of Worship, I had many restless nights. I would lie in my bed tossing and turning and worrying about the details of the services, and thinking about all the things I needed to do. I wondered if I was even capable of leading such an endeavor. I had a lot of doubts. Most of all, I was anxious about finding some kind of focus or center for the worship services. I couldn't think of anything. Time was running short.

One night, my anxiety was especially great, and so I spent a long time praying about it, begging God to show me the way forward. I finally drifted off and fell into a deep sleep. The next morning when I woke up, I had a full vision of exactly what to do. I know that this vision did not come from inside me. It was a gift of the Holy Spirit.

This was not an isolated incident. There have been other times in my life, especially when I was writing—an article, or a paper, or often, a sermon—where I came to a place that I didn't know what to do. I would try and try, and the more I tried, the more anxious I would become. So eventually I would have to give up. I would stop for the day, and later on go to bed. And then, as if by some miracle of God, when I awakened the next day, I would have the next move, or the ending, or the resolution to the problem.

I know I am not the only one who has had this experience. When my colleagues and I were studying this Scripture together and talking about the nature and role of dreams in our lives, we all had a story to tell. And so I can say without any reservation whatsoever that I believe with all my heart that God speaks to us in dreams and in visions and in miracles. Maybe it doesn't happen every day, but I know from my own experience, it does happen. And when it does, we should treat it as a great gift.

SIDEBAR: “Sleeping on It” and Memory: The Neuroscience of Dreaming
By Taylor Burton-Edwards

Dreams and dreaming had long been considered primarily to be part of the realm of other-worldly encounters and revelations in most civilizations until pioneering psychologists, including Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, suggested they may be something else. Freud tended to see them as manifestations of the unconscious mind, and so as material to work with to make sense of certain fixations, compulsions, blockages or other psychological difficulties in waking life. Carl Jung tended to see dreams as a connection to a collective unconsciousness in which the interaction of “archetypes” common across human dreaming generally might lead us to a deeper understanding of our fullest selves, including our “shadow” side, and thus lead to a more fully integrated life.

More recently, however, the field of neuroscience has come to at least a general consensus that dreams are something at once more mundane and perhaps more revelatory in a different way. (One [scholarly article](http://brain.oxfordjournals.org/content/129/1/108.long) of many that discusses these phenomena: <http://brain.oxfordjournals.org/content/129/1/108.long>.) Dreams appear to be a side effect of the process of memory consolidation that takes place primarily during sleep. This process seems to edit the thoughts and impressions we had during the previous day as it consolidates them into a more coherent narrative and stores them in different parts of the brain — visual inputs in the visual cortex, auditory in the auditory, motor in the motor, and so on. As it does so, it also activates these various parts of the brain in a way that, in some stages of sleep and memory consolidation, generates the visual, auditory, and motor “internal movies” we call dreams.

What often happens in this process as well is that ideas or images we had not quite connected with each other during our waking hours, as much as we may have tried, now become connected, sometimes with results we may experience as revelations.

That neuroscience has established such events as a more or less normal part of memory consolidation and provided a generally accepted set of biomechanical explanations for how this process seems to work need not be seen as diminishing their potential revelatory function, nor indicate in any way that the pre-moderns were entirely incorrect in seeing dreams as a medium of communication by the Divine. Rather, it helps elucidate the mechanisms built into our neurochemistry and neurons by which such communication may take place.

END SIDEBAR

SIDEBAR: What to Do When You Dream? Learn a Song!

By Jackson Henry

One of the most entertaining dreams I have experienced was when I woke up with a song in my ear. This wasn't just any song in my ear, however. My dream had been what for me was unprecedented: an opportunity for genuine, subconscious learning. You see, I *learned* a pop song in my sleep. The song was "A Long December" by Counting Crows, and why that song popped up I have no idea. (I never owned any of their albums and really didn't have a desire to.)

What I remember from my dream was sitting at the piano, taking a writing break, and simply plowing through the song, trying different chords and ultimately playing and singing what words I did know. I woke up, said "No way," got out of bed, and proceeded immediately to the piano. Long story short, it was exactly as I had learned it from the dream. Talk about eerie.

But how cool is that?

END SIDEBAR

[This story from the opening chapter of Matthew's Gospel](#) is sometimes referred to as Matthew's birth narrative. But this is not really a birth story in the way we normally think about birth stories. It isn't about how Jesus' birth took place. It isn't about his lineage. It isn't really even about establishing that God is his father.

Rather, it is a narrative about Joseph's awakening to new possibilities. It is about opening his eyes and ours to the fact that there are possibilities beyond those made by the hands of men and women. There are solutions that are God-sent.

The Gospel writer Matthew describes Joseph as a righteous man. This means, in part, that he knew and observed the laws of his Jewish faith. But he also seems to have been a good, upstanding, kind, and honorable man.

When Joseph found out that Mary, to whom he was betrothed, but not yet married, was pregnant, he knew that he was not the father of Mary's unborn child. So he must have assumed she had been unfaithful.

SIDEBAR: Marriage in First-Century Palestine

Dr. Dawn Chesser

In the time that Joseph and Mary lived, when two people became engaged to be married, at the point of their engagement, they entered into a legal contract that, for all practical purposes, was no different from the contract they would hold once they were actually married. There were three steps to marriage.

1. First came the engagement, which was transacted between the fathers of the bride and the groom. This transaction often took place while the couple were still children. It was an arranged marriage.
2. The second stage was betrothal. This took place when the couple were older and getting closer to the actual time for marriage. Once they were betrothed, they were legally bound to each other, and the relationship could be ended only by legal divorce. Betrothal lasted for about a year. During this time of betrothal, the couple lived separately, and they did not consummate the relationship.
3. The final stage was the marriage itself, when there was a huge festival and the groom took his new wife to come and live with him in his home.

[Douglas E. Wingeier, [Keeping Holy Time: Year A](#). Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001, page 33.]

END SIDEBAR

Back in the days of Joseph and Mary, things weren't like they are today, where when someone in a marriage is unfaithful, the spouse understands he or she has a number of choices. They might work it out in some way, or they might get divorced. In Mary and Joseph's time, only one consequence was generally considered appropriate for such a situation. Adultery was an act that ended the marriage and could be punishable by death. So legally, when Joseph found Mary to be with child, he could have asked that she be stoned to death, or at the very least, punished in some publicly humiliating way. That was often the way things were done. It was his right as a righteous Jewish man.

But Joseph didn't do that. Because he was a good man, he was unwilling to expose her to public disgrace. And so, Matthew tells us, he planned to cope with the situation as compassionately as possible. He planned to dismiss her quietly.

But then one night, after he had made up his mind about how to handle the situation, Joseph had this strange, amazing dream. In the dream, the angel of the Lord appeared to him and said,

"Joseph, don't abandon Mary. Stand by her. She is not pregnant by another man. Nothing ordinary has caused her pregnancy. She is pregnant only because the Holy Spirit of God, in a mystical, miraculous manner, has caused her to become pregnant. She will bear a son from this mysterious union of Spirit and flesh. And you are to name the child Jesus, which means 'God saves,' because he will save God's people from their sins" (Matthew 1:20-23, author's paraphrase).

Now this was a most unusual, vivid, and incredible dream, but still, it was only a dream.

We've all had dreams that were so vivid they seemed real. But after even a very realistic dream, when we wake up, we know that even as real as the dream might have seemed when we were having it, it was, in fact, just a dream. Maybe we will tell someone about the dream, or try to

figure out what it meant. But in the end, we know that there is a difference between our everyday world of reality and the world of dreams.

The most amazing thing about Joseph's dream is not that Joseph had it and that it was so vivid. What is amazing is that he let it influence the way he had planned to act in his real life. Because of this dream, Joseph changed his mind about his decision. He decided not to go through with his plan to end his relationship with Mary.

Joseph acted as if the dream was not just a dream. He didn't dismiss it and say, "Wow, that dream seemed so real." He acted as if the information given to him in the dream was more in touch with reality than what his personal experience and common sense had taught him in life; namely, that anytime a woman gets pregnant, there is always a man involved somewhere in the picture.

That is to say, Joseph acted in a new way as a result of his dream, a way that was a departure from the way he had planned to act. In this way, Joseph was awakened to an entirely new way of acting. Joseph was still a good and righteous man, no doubt. But now, instead of making choices out of honor and cultural code, he chose to act out of faith. He acted out of his confident belief in the truth, value, or trustworthiness of what an angel of the Lord said to him in a dream.

He acted on his secure belief in God and a trusting acceptance of God's will.

And because of this, he was changed. He was transformed, not just on the inside, but on the outside. His heart changed. His world changed. His spirit was opened up to accept a truth that hadn't been for him before. He found himself awakened to new possibilities.

Maybe a part of being awakened is the willingness to act on a dream, believe in a dream, and trust that something that seems like it can't be real, is actually real after all:

Like the dream that this baby, born in a stable in Bethlehem really is Emmanuel, God with us.

Like the dream of the kind of world that Jesus came to make manifest in this world really can be a reality for all of God's children.

We all know the famous words of Martin Luther King, Jr., who spoke a Christ-like dream into the world through a speech at the Civil Rights Movement March on Washington, August 28, 1963. (Read the [full text](https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/i-have-dream-address-delivered-march-washington-jobs-and-freedom) of the speech: <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/i-have-dream-address-delivered-march-washington-jobs-and-freedom>. Keep in mind that you may quote it in worship, but you may not make or provide any print, electronic, or other copies of it without obtaining written permission from the copyright holder.)

Martin Luther King, Jr. didn't just have a dream. He didn't just speak some beautiful and poetic words. He acted as if his dream were real, and in doing so, he helped others to live into a new reality.

We are not celebrating the birth of a baby next week because his existence was only a distant memory or dream. We are not going to all this trouble because we simply want to put up a Christmas tree and decorate our houses and have parties and buy presents for the people we love and make our children happy.

We are celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ into the world because, just like it was for Joseph, this is our awakening story. It awakens us to possibilities beyond our own. It opens our eyes to what is possible with God. It is our chance to act as if this dream of God in the world, Emmanuel, is real—so real that it causes us to change our lives, move in a different direction, and transform the world into a place of peace, hope, faith, and love for all people.

We have a dream of what Christmas is about. Let us not wake up thinking it was only a dream and dismissing it as another holiday season come and gone. Let us not wake up glad that it is finally over, so we can get on with our normal lives.

Instead, let us awaken to the new reality to which it is pointing! And let us be so bold as to act accordingly!

PLANNING NOTES

In The Series

We're at week four, the conclusion of Advent proper. We move from *See* last week to ***Dream*** this week. There is only so much of what God intends that we can see by simply observing with our waking eyes, our cognitive consciousness. Much of what God calls us into in this season goes unseen until we begin to enter into God's dream that transcends our waking, conscious understanding. So if last week we found ourselves on a plateau viewing the vista anew, this week we find ourselves in a way transcending the plateau, perhaps even hovering above it, as it were.

Next Saturday night, we move into Christmas Season. We will shift after today from anticipating what Christ will make things be at his second coming toward celebrating the implications of his first coming for now. You could decide to make Advent and Christmas two distinct series. However, because Christmas season this year is very short (only two Sundays, including Christmas Day), we have planned these two seasons as a coherent whole.

Thus we end Advent proper with the theme of *Dream* this week and pick up with *Peace*, flowing from that sense of dream as the theme for Christmas Eve.

In This Service

So how do we generate the sense of transcendence implied by *dream* this week? We start this

in the Entrance. We've suggested using ambient music or even soundscapes to accompany the procession. We hear the words of the ancient O Antiphons first in a whisper, then in quiet singing. And we intersperse the reading of the gospel with quiet singing as well, seeking God to open our eyes to God's dream as we do so. And in the midst of that, we light the fourth Advent candle in silence.

The purpose of the dream in this story isn't for Joseph to abide in it, though. From the dream, Joseph takes action, dramatically different action than he had determined was most appropriate in his waking consideration. So the sermon today becomes an opportunity not only to enter into God's dream more completely, but to begin to take action and pray differently because of it. Thus we call attention to what we seek in prayer more intentionally this week, and we pray with a song underscoring our prayers.

As you come to the end of today's service, be sure to issue a special invitation to the services you will offer this Christmas season (Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, Epiphany). On Christmas Eve, as an early reminder here, be especially keen on inviting folks back not only for Christmas services, but for the Season after Epiphany series as well, and since that series is about evangelism, on providing good ways for your folks to extend that invitation to others they know who currently have no church home.

CHRISTMAS EVE: PEACE

[Music Notes](#)

[Preaching Notes](#)

[Planning Notes](#)

FULL SERVICE

ENTRANCE

Opening Medley of Christmas hymns (three to five) including procession to the crèche by children (costumed or otherwise) bringing figurines of Mary, Joseph, Jesus, angel and shepherds, while singing "Away in the Manger" or another well-known children's Christmas hymn as accompaniment.

Call to Worship (Adapted from Latin antiphon, *Hodie Christus natus est*)

On this night, Christ is born!

Now the Savior has appeared!

On this night, the heavenly chorus resounds!

All creation rejoices!

On this night, the church throughout the world joins their cry:

Glory to God in the highest! Alleluia!

Songs (one or more of the Christmas hymns that include “Gloria in excelsis” — UMH 236, 238, 240, 244, 248)

Prayer of Illumination (adapted from Lessons and Carols)

Open us, O God, to hear again the message of the angels,
and to go in heart and mind with the shepherds to Bethlehem
to see the glorious redemption you have brought to pass
through the Newborn lying in a manger. **Amen.**

WORD AND RESPONSE

Reader 1: Luke 2: 1-3

Choir or Band Song about the difficult context of the birth

“In the Bleak Midwinter”

UMH 221

“’Twas in the Moon of Wintertime”

UMH 244

“I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day”

[Discipleship Ministries Website](#)

Reader 2: Luke 2: 4-7

Congregational Song: “Once in Royal David’s City”

UMH 250, stanzas 1-2

Reader 3: Luke 2: 8-14

Choir or Band song on the angel’s appearance to the shepherds

Glory to God in the Highest (Canticle of God’s Glory) (UMH 82)

Glory to God in the Highest (TFWS 2276 — Refrain by congregation, stanzas by
choir/ensemble)

Or similar

Reader 4: Luke 2: 15-20

Congregational Hymn: “Sing We Now of Christmas,” UMH 237, stanzas 1-3 or other
arrangement

Sermon “Peace”

Choral Response “Still, Still, Still” W&S 3066

THANKSGIVING AND COMMUNION

Word and Table II UMH 12 (for invitation, confession, pardon, offering)

Offertory Music

Great Thanksgiving for Christmas Eve, Day or Season [BOW 56-57](#)

Music During Communion

Candle Lighting

“Night of Silence/Silent Night” (Choir or Ensemble or Solo/Congregation).

Score available through [OneLicense.net](https://www.onelicense.net)

Thanksgiving after Communion

UMH 11

SENDING FORTH

Congregational Song “Joy to the World” and/or “Go Tell It on the Mountain”

Dismissal

Pastor: Christ the Savior is born.

Go and spread the good news everywhere!

People: Thanks be to God.

Choral or Band or Instrumental Postlude

Other recommended hymns for Christmas Eve:

“Some Children See Him”	W&S 3065
“Welcome to Our World”	W&S 3067
“The Virgin Mary Had a Baby Boy”	TFWS 2098
“Mary Had a Baby”	W&S 3058

MUSIC NOTES

As you see a number of suggestions for music on Christmas Eve, remember one truth: you must be the best judge of what your congregation will and won't sing, especially on major holidays like Christmas. Be bold in your planning, but remember that the progress and health of your congregation is at stake in times like this. Many churches have traditions for these holidays for which you may or may not want to become a martyr. Understand, though, that there is also a responsibility for leadership in the church to be prophetic in its ministry in an ever-changing context.

The truth is, not many things can do more harm to the liturgy of worship than damaging the trust between a song leader and the congregation. As musicians, we have a responsibility to foster and nurture an environment of trust so congregations will be willing to sing whatever might give voice to the piety and ministry of a given church. How will the people have confidence to sing to the Lord a new song if they do not trust their musical leadership?

It is because of these questions that you, as the leader of the congregation's song, are responsible for knowing the traditions of the church in which you lead and how far people are willing to go to do something new. Work within your teams to cast a vision for making Christmas Eve worship both respectful of past traditions and daring as the church gives witness to God's love in the community. Then determine what Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs best allow your church to be who God is calling them to be, especially on a day of wonder such as

Christmas Eve.

While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks

Taken from the birth narrative from Luke 2:1-20, this traditional Christmas hymn is a way for the congregation to sing the story of the shepherds' encounter with the "angel of the Lord." Because of the continuing narrative found in the hymn, it is best to sing it in its entirety. However, because there are six stanzas, it is also recommended to keep a brisk pace. This story is the core of the Christmas Eve message. Keep it engaging! The tune, CHRISTMAS, is best accompanied on organ or piano.

Angels We Have Heard on High

I can't think of one person who doesn't look forward to singing the "Gloria" chorus of this hymn. In addition to the beautiful way it tells the story of Christmas, this setting is very well written and one of the easiest and most interesting hymns to sing in four-part harmony. Sing this hymn boldly with organ, brass, handbells, or even *a cappella*. Since most congregations sing everything one dynamic level — loud — providing an opportunity for dynamic variance (loud/soft/loud) within a hymn can increase its potency within a worship setting. "Be not afraid" to sing either stanza 3 or 4 with a hushed quality, but be sure to keep the tempo lively.

[History of Hymns: http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-angels-we-have-heard-on-high](http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-angels-we-have-heard-on-high)

Hark! The Herald Angels Sing

Not many Christmas hymns are as well known as this Charles Wesley hymn, which is set to a familiar melody by Felix Mendelssohn. Sing it with gusto, and keep the tempo moderate — not too fast, and not too slow. Accompany with organ, brass, handbells, or any other instruments you have available on Christmas Eve. [History of Hymns:](http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-hark-the-herald-angels-sing)

<http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-hark-the-herald-angels-sing>

On This Day Earth Shall Ring

This melody may not be familiar for some churches, but rest assured, it is a Christmas standard in many places. There is an inherent power in this text/melody combination, and the PERSONENT HODIE tune is exciting for keyboardists. Pronunciation of the Latin text is as follows: "ee-deh-oh glah-ree-ah een ek-shell-sees deh-oh." If you have a handbell choir, there are many wonderful settings of this hymn available at handbellworld.com or ring-press.com. The tune has a distinct Renaissance-era character, so even if you sing this with organ or piano as the accompaniment, add a tambourine in a pattern with a quarter note on beats 1, 3, and 4, with two eighth notes on count 2 to create a spirited atmosphere.

'Twas in the Moon of Wintertime

This Christmas carol has risen in prominence because of its importance as an early Native North American nativity carol. The hymn is replete with imagery that originates from the Huron people of North America. It is very singable and can be accompanied in a number of ways. Yes, it may be played on organ or piano, but it is also frequently sung with a hand drum and unaccompanied flute. Care needs to be taken at the transition into the refrain with a long

enough pause for breath before the refrain begins. This can be accomplished by slowing slightly in the measure before the refrain and inserting a cutoff at the break in the measure with enough time for a quick breath. [History of Hymns:](#)

<http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-twas-in-the-moon-of-wintertime>

Once in Royal David's City

One of my personal Christmas favorites, this hymn focuses on the humanity of Jesus and his ability to understand our human condition in the midst of his divinity. Following the lead of musicians like Sufjan Stevens, one of the best ways to accompany this hymn is with a folk, “grassroots” ensemble of guitar, mandolin, banjo, and brushed snare drum with a unison or harmonized melody. See the linked chord sheet for a setting in this style. [History of Hymns:](#)

<http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-once-in-royal-davids-city-serves-as-processional-hymn>

Glory to God in the Highest (Canticle of God's Glory)

This Scottish chant might be a possibility for your church if you have a confident song leader and/or a choir who sings four-part harmony fairly easily. This may not fit every worship context, but it is a good place to start if your congregation is open to chant that is accessible. Believe it or not, they might find joy in the singing of chant periodically! Freeing ourselves from relentless rhythm can be surprising, creative, and somewhat liberating. Worship leadership with this is key: if you embody a sense of confidence in the leading of this chant, it will go a long way. Make sure the words flow in a conversational manner; they are not intended to be sung in the exact rhythms shown on the page.

Glory to God in the Highest (David Haas)

Haas has created one of the most energetic and lively settings of the Gloria with this chorus. The melody is very accessible to congregations, and the choir or soloists can sing the stanzas. The piano part is quite challenging, so your pianist needs to be adept at playing very technical passages. This setting would also work well with a band who loves embracing liturgical texts. Set in the key of E, guitarists will find this very accessible.

Sing We Now of Christmas

This French carol has become more popular, and the tune has also been used often with the Easter hymn, “Now the Green Blade Riseth” (UMH 311). We recommend use here with stanzas 1-3 only, since stanzas 4 and 5 specifically address the Epiphany. The tune is bouncy (as it should be!), so don't let it drag with an accompaniment that is too loud or heavy. There are a number of choral, children's, and handbell arrangements of this tune, and many are accessible for choirs of any size or ability. There are several options available from the Choristers Guild, <http://www.choristersguild.org>; type “Sing We Now of Christmas” into the search box.

[History of Hymns:](#) <http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-sing-we-now-of-christmas>

Still, Still, Still

This nineteenth-century lullaby was originally published in Salzburg, Austria. Its words and verses have varied some over the years, not only in translation, but also in the original German. The version included in *Worship & Song* (3066) combines a more recent English translation (stanzas 1 and 2) with a variation of stanza 2 of the German version. The lilting tune is designed for quiet singing, like a parent singing an infant or young child to sleep. We suggest this as a choral response to extend the sense and feeling of peace evoked as the theme and conclusion of the sermon. [Hymn study: http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/still-still-still](http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/still-still-still)

Night of Silence/Silent Night

If you are not yet familiar with this work by Daniel Kantor, you are missing out on an opportunity to present the traditional carol, “Silent Night,” with a newer text that addresses the frailty of the human condition at Christmas. Published by GIA Publications (G-5622, https://www.giamusic.com/search_details.cfm?title_id=453), this choral setting is a musical overlay in which both melodies and texts are sung simultaneously at the conclusion. The effect, especially when accompanied by the written instrumentation, is breathtaking. The candles used in candlelighting rituals, then, are more than a way to honor Jesus’ birth. They are also a reminder that Christ is still with us as the bringer of peace in the midst of our hurt, pain, and loneliness.

A setting for congregation only can also be purchased and downloaded through [OneLicense.net](http://www.onelicense.net).

Some Children See Him

This Alfred Burt carol was chosen to be a part of the collection *Worship & Song* because of its poignancy, but also because of its level of familiarity within many congregations. Many of the colors used in this song, when taken out of context, could be seen as culturally insensitive. However, the presence of all the colors together with such a caring text can be a unifying element, too, celebrating diversity in ways in which many children can especially relate. This piece was originally intended as a solo with piano accompaniment, but despite its somewhat irregular 5/4 time signature, the singable phrases make this an accessible Christmas selection for congregations, too. If the E in the second phrase is too high, it is possible to sing this down one whole step in the key of E-flat, thus making the high note a D instead. [Hymn study: http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/some-children-see-him](http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/some-children-see-him)

Welcome to Our World

Chris Rice has written a touching song of welcome that calls us to address the pain we witness and feel in our community. Jesus comes as the bringer of peace and salvation, and we make room for him in our hearts, in our churches, in our communities, and in our world. Don’t make the accompaniment of this contemporary hymn overly complicated. Simple is better; a guitar or piano best brings out the character of the text and tune.

The Virgin Mary Had a Baby Boy

If you are looking for a different musical expression of the nativity, consider this West Indian carol that features idiomatic Caribbean rhythms, harmony, and melodic contour. Many of the

characters of the nativity are represented: Mary, Jesus, angels, shepherds, and wise men. Piano, organ, or instrumental ensemble work well with this setting. Regardless of the harmonic instruments, add lots of percussion! Make sure the tempo remains lively, and encourage some movement within the congregation.

Mary Had a Baby

This African American spiritual is a great way to offer a four-part, *a cappella* hymn (as led by the choir) on Christmas Eve. This spiritual is also a way to incorporate multigenerational groups — children, youth, and adults — by dividing up stanzas with each group leading a different stanza. The repetition of the text and the predictable contour of the melody will make this an immediate favorite with people of all ages. Don't take the tempo too quickly, however. Allow it to remain steady and moderate, and, if clapping during the song, be sure to clap only on beats two and four.

PREACHING NOTES

Over the past four weeks of the Advent season, we have talked about a lot of things.

The first week, we talked about the fragility of life and the need to not only examine our lives and the choices we are making, but also to live in continual gratitude for all that we have been given by the grace of God.

The second week, we talked about John the Baptist, the one who was sent by God to prepare the way of the Lord. I suggested that, like John, during the weeks before Christmas, we, who call ourselves disciples of Jesus Christ, must work diligently to prepare ourselves to receive him by engaging in intentional acts of repentance and turning ourselves and reorienting our lives back toward God.

On the third Sunday, we found our hero from the previous week, John the Baptist, locked up in jail and experiencing a few doubts about the role of Jesus. We talked about the precarious nature of the world and how, during times of fear and uncertainty, we need to give testimony: to look around the world to see and name the clear signs of confirmation that Jesus is, indeed, the Messiah, Emmanuel, the promised one sent by God to save the world.

And finally, last week, we talked about how Joseph's dream wasn't a birth narrative about Jesus. It was a narrative about Joseph's awakening to the reality of God in the world. I suggested we all need to live not as if the statement that "God is with us" is merely a dream, but a reality that calls us to respond in word and action as disciples of Jesus Christ.

How do we respond in word and action? That question deserves a much longer answer than time allows this week. That is a sermon series in and of itself! So you'll want to take a moment to invite people on Christmas Eve to be sure to come back for the next Sermon Series, "Come and See!" beginning January 8, 2017. In this series, we will explore the call

to follow him, and the response of many different people, during the season after Epiphany.

So now we come to the evening that we have been preparing for all of these weeks. Are we ready? Are we prepared? Have we prepared the way of the Lord? Have we made his paths straight?

The familiar story of the birth of Jesus told in Luke's Gospel seems particularly helpful for our predicament this year. As we were looking at the story as a team, we noticed that Luke's description of the birth of Jesus brings together people from many different places and walks of life: shepherds in the field, a couple from out of town, an innkeeper, an angel of the Lord, and a terrifying heavenly host. These characters have no inherent connection to one another. But their lives intersect in a powerful encounter as together they bear witness to the birth of this extraordinary child. Their common experience and witness allows them to find unity, even in the midst of their very different circumstances of life. It allows them to feel a momentary peace. It helps them see past the past and the present to catch a glimpse of a future that could be different from what they have known. They can see in this child's face, if only for a second, the promise of God's kingdom.

We live in a turbulent time. As we have noted over the past four weeks, the world right now is in a precarious and even frightening period for people in the United States and its neighbors around the globe. No matter what political "side" people have been on over the past few months, the presidential election has now ended. The United States has a president-elect who will be inaugurated in just a few weeks. There are satisfied winners and disappointed losers. There are global neighbors who are excited about the outcome, and global neighbors who are concerned.

No matter who we are or how we feel, we have been united by this common experience.

Likewise, the state of the United Methodist Church as a denomination is also in a precarious and fragile state as we struggle to find a way to maintain unity while recognizing our ever-increasing diversity as we live into the reality of being a global church. It is a wonderful time, and yet it is made all the more difficult by our desire to honor the differences and wide-ranging opinions that exist within our worldwide denominational family.

So the reality is, this Christmas, families in your community may be gathering for the holidays with unresolved feelings and very different opinions about these outcomes and what they may mean for the future. There could be tension around the table in many households, tension in the wider community, and tension as we gather as congregations to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ in our sanctuaries on Christmas Eve.

In your local church on Christmas Eve, the gathering of people in the sanctuary is likely going to include not just Democrats and Republicans, and not just progressive, moderate, and conservative United Methodists, but members and non-members, regular attendees and non-

regulars, local visitors and folks who are in town for the holidays. There will be people who have not been in church since last Christmas Eve. There will be many who have not heard your series up to this point. And there will be some who really don't believe that Jesus is the Son of God, and who came to church on Christmas Eve not to celebrate the birth of their Lord and Savior, but to please their family or loved ones.

And so — smack dab into the middle of this difficult situation of unresolved feelings, diverse opinions, religious and political differences, holiday tension, and friends sitting alongside foes — a sign of peace is born into the world.

The scene in Luke's Gospel of the birth of Jesus is a hectic situation. It's not just hectic because of the multitude characters involved. It is also hectic because it involves the collision of multiple and diverse scenes into this singular moment in time: the census that caused a young couple to travel a great distance across deserts and mountains on the week of their child's birth; the "no vacancy" sign at the only inn in town; the shepherds terrified by the angel of the Lord appearing and speaking out of the night sky; the heavenly host praising God; and the child being born in a stable and laid to recover from the birth experience on a bed of hay in a manger, surrounded by his parents, animals, and curious and overwhelmed shepherds.

It is hectic.

But, then, childbirth is always hectic.

I vividly remember giving birth to my two sons. The details of those two scenes were very different, but they were equally hectic. Giving birth is not a peaceful or pleasurable event, after all. It is violent and messy and painful and frightening. And yet, in the aftermath, there is a newborn baby, swaddled in soft blankets and gently laid in your waiting arms. When you gaze upon the face of your newborn baby, you forget about the many painful months, weeks, days, and hours that preceded the moment. You forget about the sacrifices you made. You put it all behind you and simply concentrate on the incredible peace that you feel. After the violence of a birth, there is a quiet and peace that happens. There is joy, contentment, relief.

Out of the frenzy and craziness of the world situation, the political process, and the holiday season, comes a sign of peace. The birth of Jesus, his existence, his life and teachings, his death and resurrection, his promise to come again: It is a sign from God. It is a divine communication from God to all people. It is a promise that there is hope for the world.

The good news I want you to proclaim from the pulpit, wherever you serve in this great, wide world, is that on this day, in the city of David, a Savior was born. He is the Messiah, the Lord, the Prince of Peace.

This good news is not just for a certain group of people or a certain scene. This good news is for whoever has ears to hear it. It is not a general message. It is specific and personal for each member of the human family.

For those who are struggling with some sort of personal problem, it is a promise of healing.

For those who don't believe Jesus Christ is the son of God, it is a glimpse of God's love for all God's children.

For those who feel like the whole world is in the violent throes of chaos and confusion, it is a moment of respite and reflection.

For those who live in darkness and fear, it casts great light: the pledge that a new day, a new week, a new year, a new life, is coming for each and every one of us.

For those who imagine that this world isn't worth saving, it speaks a word of hope.

And for those who on this night find themselves at odds with someone or something, it offers a promise of peace that passes all understanding, now and forevermore.

PLANNING NOTES

In The Series

While this service is part five of a seven-part series of services, in many ways, and perhaps for most who will attend it, it will be a standalone service.

Still, keep the sense of the series in mind as you plan it. Even call attention to it as appropriate, particularly as this service leads into the next two.

We concluded Advent on Sunday with *Dream*. Tonight, we explore a core element of God's dream for the world, the dream of **Peace**. The incarnation, God becoming flesh and dwelling among us in Jesus, is already part of God's making peace with humanity and the greater creation. An angel announces this to shepherds, and Mary's pondering of "all these things in her heart" embodies God's dream of peace set loose in the world through Jesus in another way.

In This Service

Many will come to Christmas Eve services who generally attend few if any other services during the year. If you want some of these people to come back, there are at least two things you need to do.

One is to invite them in a compelling way. While the most effective invitations are personal invitations from people (not the pastor!) who already know them, an effective public invitation can help reinforce the personal one. Be sure to use this service to invite folks both to the rest of the services in this series (Christmas Day and Epiphany, January 1) and to any Christmas-related events you may be hosting.

But don't stop there. Probably most folks will not come back tomorrow or next Sunday, given the time of year. So be sure to make a strong invitation and offer a compelling preview of your "Season after Epiphany" series as well. The overall theme for this series in the coming year is "Come and See," echoing the invitation of Jesus to Andrew, and then Andrew to Peter in John's Gospel. Decide up front whether your series invitation will start with Baptism of the Lord (which may feel "insider" for some with its focus on reaffirming the baptismal covenant) or the following Sunday (January 15). If the invitation is for January 15, keep in mind you'll need to make sure more of your folks make the invitation one on one between now and then.

A second is make this Christmas Eve service more "traditional" than not. Your annual guests or other less frequent guests are highly likely to come expecting to do what they've always done this night with only minor variations. They want to sing familiar Christmas hymns, hear the story from Luke, celebrate Communion, and light candles to "Silent Night." They don't want folks messing with these basics too much. This is what Christmas Eve services are to them. Don't break their trust. If you do change this up too much, you can expect a few angry responses, and a lot of those you invite to join you for the next series simply decline your invitation — and perhaps will not show up next year on Christmas Eve, either.

This is why so many elements in our commended service are traditional, including the use of the Christmas Eve or Christmas Day liturgy straight from *The United Methodist Hymnal* and *Book of Worship* and the singing of many familiar Christmas hymns. One element that may be less familiar is our suggested pairing of "Night of Silence" with "Silent Night," but since the congregation sings "Silent Night" at the candle lighting with the traditional words and text, the effect may be more amplification of the tradition than something entirely new.

CHRISTMAS DAY: WORD

[Music Notes](#)

[Preaching Notes](#)

[Planning Notes](#)

FULL SERVICE

ENTRANCE

Prelude: Medley of Christmas songs that begin on lower pitches — maybe starting with something like "Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence" (UMH 626) or "Of the Father's Love Begotten" (UMH 184).

***Greeting:**

Jesus Christ is born today!

Alleluia!

***Hymn**

"When Christmas Morn is Dawning"

UMH 232 or

“O Morning Star, How Fair and Bright”

UMH 247

Prayer of Illumination

Be born in our hearing, Lord Jesus,
and open our lives to you:
Our Word, our Light, our Life.
Amen.

WORD AND RESPONSE

Gospel Reading [John 1:1-2](#)

Hymn or Choral or Band on “Word” such as “Word of God, Come Down on Earth” (UMH 182)

Prayers: For the mission of the church, to listen and follow the Word made flesh ...

Gospel Reading [John 1:3-5](#)

Hymn or Choral or Band on “Life” or “Light” such as “Christ Is the World’s Light” (UMH 188) or “Break Forth, O Beauteous Heavenly Light” (UMH 223) or Jane Marshall’s “Eternal Light” (see <https://www.riteseries.org/song/Hymnal1982/658/> for a hymn-based version)

Prayers: For our social, economic, and political life — to reflect the light of Christ, and build, sustain, and protect life of every kind in our world

Gospel Reading [John 1:6-8](#)

Hymn/Song/Poem/Pastor’s Comment on “Witness” such as “Go, Tell It on the Mountain” (UMH 251) or “On Christmas Night” (W&S 3064)

Prayers: For all who proclaim the gospel, and for ourselves to proclaim Christ faithfully

Gospel Reading [John 1:9-11](#)

Song/Hymn/Choral Piece/Poem/Pastor’s Comment on “Unwelcome,” including “Welcome to Our World” as one song in this mix (Chris Rice, CCLI [SongSelect](#) #2317391)

Prayers: For all who are left behind, isolated, harmed, or unwelcomed by the world, and for all who are sick

Gospel Reading [John 1:12-14](#)

Song/Hymn/ Choral Piece/Poem/Pastor’s Comment on Seeing the Glory/Light Shining on Us such as “Light of the World” (Matt Redman, CCLI [SongSelect](#) #2650577)

Prayer: Gloria in Excelsis/Lord’s Prayer

[Reflection: “Word”]

THANKSGIVING AND OFFERING

Hymn “Sing We Now of Christmas” (upbeat), stanzas 1-3 UMH 237

New Verse 4

Word in flesh among us, God taking human form,
We proclaim your glory on this Christmas morn. REFRAIN

New Verse 5

Thanks and praise to Jesus, thanks to God on high,
Thanks to Holy Spirit, One in Three drawn nigh. REFRAIN

SENDING FORTH

Hymn "Joy to the World"

UMH 246

Dismissal

We have seen his glory,
the glory as of God's only-begotten,
full of grace and truth.

How great our joy!

Go forth, and proclaim it!

Thanks be to God.

Other recommended hymns for Christmas Day:

"He Is Born" UMH 228

"Love Came Down at Christmas" UMH 242

"'Twas in the Moon of Wintertime" UMH 244

"It Came Upon the Midnight Clear" UMH 218

MUSIC NOTES

Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence

The text of this hymn is mysterious in its presentation of Christ descending to earth because it is a wonderful use of anamnesis (bringing the past into the present) and prolepsis (bringing the future into the present). The fullness of time is addressed as we acknowledge Christ's presence with us in the past and when God's reign comes in fullness upon the earth. Although a powerful hymn on the organ, there are a multitude of ways to embody the mood of the hymn:

- Organ accompaniment, either as written or altered.
- Choral hum on an open D chord (D, A), with a soloist leading the congregation on a unison melody.
- The same hum played as a drone on the organ.
- Even though it is not a plainchant, it could be sung in the same manner, *a cappella* with unison melody.

Of the Father's Love Begotten

"Evermore and evermore." The concluding words of each stanza of this beautiful plainchant melody ring as the continuing praise of the incarnation and the presence of God in flesh through Jesus Christ. This tune, DIVINUM MYSTERIUM, has been used in recent years as a chant that is often set with other tunes — for instance, see the choral work, "Hope For Resolution"

([Earthsongs](#), ES.W-034) — as a statement of praise. The first three phrases move upward, as do our praise and, especially in days of old, the incense that represents prayers rising to heaven. However, the melody returns to the tonic (D) at the end of each stanza. Singing plainchant is made easier by having a confident song leader, and a choir is very helpful as well. When singing, I would recommend a different approach than playing the accompaniment as written in *The United Methodist Hymnal*. Either use a bass pedalpoint from an organ or other bass-clef instrument with a unison melody, or use an open D chord from any instrument (D,A), whether organ, piano, guitar, or strings. Allow a flute to double the melody on the first stanza, then encourage some basic improvisation on a D scale throughout, especially in transitions between phrases. [History of Hymns](#): <http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-of-the-fathers-love-begotten>

Or, should you choose a different approach, here is a setting with the traditional Polish carol tune, [W ZLOBIE LEZY](#): <http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/of-the-fathers-love-begotten-traditional-polish-melody>

When Christmas Morn Is Dawning

This sweet German folk tune serves as the perfect setting for this children's nativity hymn. This hymn, like others written for children, expresses the wonder of being in the presence of the newborn Jesus. If your children were like mine at a very young age, they are fascinated with babies! Allow them this same fascination with the story of Jesus' birth as sung through this hymn. Though there are three musical phrases in this hymn, the text is quite short, as the second phrase is always repeated. A simple organ or piano accompaniment works well for this selection. If your pianist has some basic improvisation skills, I would recommend an [alberti bass](#) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=urWOKOTY1Ok>) accompaniment (à la Mozart) in the left hand.

O Morning Star, How Fair and Bright

This hymn has been sung for many years, and the tune has often been used as the central theme for other works (see Mendelssohn, "There Shall a Star Come Out of Jacob"). One of the longer hymn texts and tunes in our hymnal, it is an adventure to sing and requires the use of the hymnal for aid. Though the first six-measure phrase is repeated, it is long enough that using a screen may not be helpful in the singing of this particular hymn. However, the setting in the hymnal is also a wonderful four-part choral setting by J. S. Bach, so you may even choose to use this hymn as a choral work in worship. [History of Hymns](#): <http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-o-morning-star-how-fair-and-bright>

Word of God, Come Down on Earth

I have discovered that most hymns in *The United Methodist Hymnal* that refer to the "Word" are specifically directed to the "word" as Scripture. This is one of the few hymns that refer to the Word as described in the first chapter of the Gospel of John. Though not a "Christmas hymn," it all depends on how you interpret what is required to be such a text. John 1 is always the lectionary Scripture for Christmas Day, so it seems most appropriate! This chorale is best

accompanied by organ or piano. [History of Hymns: http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-word-of-god-come-down-on-earth](http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-word-of-god-come-down-on-earth)

Christ Is the World's Light

This most interesting hymn by Fred Pratt Green presents us with what it takes to confess Christ as Savior, including the fact we cannot “serve him and despise another.” It also uses language not often seen in hymns in regard to Jesus: He was “sold once for silver” and “murdered.” These truths from the gospels can be hard to accept, let alone sing. However, it is important in proclaiming the gospel that we include this as a part of the story.

In the context of Christmas, the first stanza presents us with the reflection on light, and singing stanza 1 only in a medley with the hymn, “I Want to Walk as a Child of the Light,” would be most fitting. Approaching this as a medley will give a little more time to focus on the light imagery. In order for this to be most effective, begin playing the first phrase of “I Want to Walk as a Child of the Light” (in the key of D) on the last note of “Christ Is the World's Light.” Allow the first two phrases of “I Want to Walk” to serve as the introduction. Whereas the first hymn is more of a chorale (and, thus, effectively accompanied on organ or piano), the second is intended to be a folk hymn and could be accompanied by any number of instruments, including piano, guitar, organ, and/or any combination of string or wind instruments. [History of Hymns: http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-christ-is-the-worlds-light](http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-christ-is-the-worlds-light)

Break Forth, O Beauteous Heavenly Light

The text of this chorale is a combination of texts by Johann Rist (translated by John Troutbeck) and Fred Pratt Green. In a chorale setting harmonized by J. S. Bach, this selection would work well as a congregational hymn for those well suited to singing chorales, and it could work for any choir to sing as a four-part choral response. Organ is the recommended accompaniment. [History of Hymns: http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-break-forth-o-beauteous-heavenly-light](http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-break-forth-o-beauteous-heavenly-light)

Eternal Light

Found in *The Hymnal 1982*, this Christopher Idle hymn focuses upon the eternal nature of our relationship with God. Vivid imagery of light is found in the hymn, which may be best sung as a choral response. Jane Marshall, composer of the choral standard, “My Eternal King,” has written the tune, which may be more accessible in some churches than others. Accompaniment is best on organ or piano.

Go, Tell It on the Mountain

One of the most highly anticipated songs to sing at Christmas is this beloved spiritual. Allow the children in your church to come forward and lead the singing! Sometimes adults lack the energy needed to support this energetic hymn of proclamation, and children can help us reclaim that. Bands, choirs, bells, and any other instrumental ensembles certainly have accompaniments for this song, and it works well to sing quickly or slowly. Its versatility makes it accessible to any church, anywhere! [History of Hymns: http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-go-tell-it-on-the-mountain](http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-go-tell-it-on-the-mountain)

[hymns-go-tell-it-on-the-mountain](#)

Chord sheet: <http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/go-tell-it-on-the-mountain>

On Christmas Night

Many people know this traditional English Christmas carol by its tune name, SUSSEX CAROL. The pairing of it here with the focus of “witness” is evident when considering the inclusion of the story of the angels’ news, which is also akin to another carol in the same key and meter, “Good Christian Friends, Rejoice” (UMH 224). Though one is English and the other German, the two work very well together if you are searching for a medley of Christmas songs. They both tell of the news of Jesus’ birth and can flow seamlessly from one into the other. “On Christmas Night” also has a great deal of imagery of the light found in John 1. Keep the tempo moving so the melody has a joyous, celebratory mood, but not so fast that the congregation is unable to breathe appropriately between stanzas. There are also a number of instrumental settings of this familiar carol, including a number of options for handbells at handbellworld.com.

Welcome to Our World

Chris Rice has written a touching song of welcome that calls us to address the pain we witness and feel in our community. Jesus comes as the bringer of peace and salvation, and we make room for him in our hearts, in our churches, in our communities, and in our world. Don’t make the accompaniment of this contemporary hymn overly complicated. Simple is better; a guitar or piano best brings out the character of the text and tune.

Light of the World

One of the songs in the modern repertoire that embraces the biblical imagery of John 1, Matt Redman’s “Light of the World” is accessible for many congregations. The chord structure is very simple, but a couple of elements are a bit tricky: (1) The entrance of the melody in the verses on the leading tone (7th degree of the scale), and (2) the presence of a great deal of syncopation. Repetition can be helpful in these sections. I recommend singing and playing this selection in the key of G, at least the first time it is sung. The tessitura (location of the majority of notes) in the chorus remains a bit high if the congregation does not know the song, so lowering it to G is helpful in its teaching.

Sing We Now of Christmas

This French carol has become more popular, and the tune has also been used often with the Easter hymn, “Now the Green Blade Riseth” (UMH 311). We recommend use here with stanzas 1-3 only, since stanzas 4 and 5 specifically address the Epiphany. The tune is bouncy (as it should be!), so don’t let it drag with an accompaniment that is too loud or heavy. There are a number of choral, children’s, and handbell arrangements of this tune, and many are accessible for choirs of any size or ability. There are several options available from the Choristers Guild, <http://www.choristersguild.org>. [History of Hymns: http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-sing-we-now-of-christmas](http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-sing-we-now-of-christmas)

Joy to the World, The Lord Has Come

This reimagination of the Isaac Watts text is an effective way to bookend this service with the traditional setting sung at the beginning. The recommended liturgical use in this service is singing the chorus only. It is easily accompanied by piano, guitar, or band. One thing to note: If using CCLI SongSelect as the source, the first beat of the chorus is actually a rest (The “joy” on the first beat is the conclusion of each stanza). Invite the congregation to begin singing on beat 2 of the chorus.

He Is Born

Many children in your congregation and community may know this Christmas carol because of its wide use in children’s choirs, both in churches and in the greater community. Give the men in your choir the ability to serve as the bagpipes by singing a re-enunciated drone on an “O” vowel in open fifths (Basses: F, Tenors C), especially on the refrain. They can even scoop into it a little bit to simulate a bagpipe/drum combination. Hand drum also fits well to accompany this joyful song. However, if you happen to have people in your congregation who actually play bagpipes and/or oboe, put them to work! If your church has a choir, simply instruct them to sing in four parts on the stanzas. You may also choose to put a fermata (brief hold) on the last note of each stanza before returning to the refrain. Keep the tempo lively! [History of Hymns: http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-french-carol-he-is-born-celebrates-joyous-season](http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-french-carol-he-is-born-celebrates-joyous-season)

Love Came Down at Christmas

This hymn would also make a great pairing with “In the Bleak Midwinter” for a two-song set of hymns by Christina Rossetti. Even the rhythms of this Irish melody and the Holst tune of “In the Bleak Midwinter” are very similar. The focus on God’s identity as Love is at the very heart of Wesleyan hymnody, and thus this hymn is a wonderful part of the Methodist repertoire of hymns for this season. Accompany with a simple instrumentation of organ, piano, or guitar, and add other instruments as able. [History of Hymns: http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-love-came-down-at-christmas](http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-love-came-down-at-christmas)

‘Twas in the Moon of Wintertime

This Christmas carol has risen in prominence because of its importance as an early Native North American nativity carol. The hymn is replete with imagery that originates from the Huron people of North America. It is very singable and can be accompanied in a number of ways. Yes, it may be played on organ or piano, but it is also frequently sung with a hand drum and unaccompanied flute. Care needs to be taken at the transition into the refrain with a long enough pause for breath before the refrain begins. This can be accomplished by slowing slightly in the measure before the refrain and inserting a cutoff at the break in the measure with enough time for a quick breath. [History of Hymns: http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-twas-in-the-moon-of-wintertime](http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-twas-in-the-moon-of-wintertime)

It Came upon the Midnight Clear

Having found as much use as an Advent hymn as a Christmas hymn, “It Came upon the Midnight Clear” offers a clear sense of anticipation toward a time when peace shall rule over all the earth. The hymn begins with the angels’ song and moves toward text more reminiscent of

the biblical language of the reign of God. This would serve as a great addition to the hymn singing of Christmas Day because it is a very well known hymn with themes of hope and peace. The best accompaniment for this hymn is either organ, piano, or unaccompanied SATB choir. Don't let the tempo lag, however, because the sense of anticipation is enhanced by the busier feel of the 6/8 meter. [History of Hymns: http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-it-came-upon-a-midnight-clear](http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-it-came-upon-a-midnight-clear)

PREACHING NOTES

We would encourage you not to preach today; but if you feel you must, here is a possible direction.

In the days following Christmas, lots of people are just exhausted. We clergy are exhausted. Music leaders, lay leaders, choir members, and church staff are exhausted (especially on a year when Christmas Eve falls on Saturday!). Church members, especially active ones, are exhausted. Maybe folks are even kind of glad it is over. They might be relieved that, after this service, they will have a little break from church.

And so it is important to realize that people's feelings may be all over the map as they gather for worship on Christmas Day. There may be some who feel resentful. There may be those who are in attendance more out of guilt than joy. And there will be some, hopefully more than a few, who are downright thrilled to be in worship on Christmas Day!

Whether folks are feeling joyful, excited and peaceful today, or feeling like they just survived a war, the truth of the matter is that every year when people come to this holiday, in some form or another, we all have to reinterpret our experience of the holiday season according to our current life circumstances.

Christmas is a day that is, for most people, laden with both expectations and memories. We bring to Christmas Day not only our present circumstances, but our ghosts of Christmases past and our hopes for Christmases future.

There are those who remember the Christmases of childhood with fondness and joy. For those who had positive Christmas experiences as children, there may be a strong desire to re-create that experience as closely as possible for their current family situation. But of course, no matter how hard we try, we can't achieve this goal. We can't return to the past, and we can't bring back to life the cast of characters or the particular circumstances that were a part of it all. Those things we hold in our memories, no matter how idyllic we remember them as being, cannot be reproduced. They are the past.

Other people's Christmases-past do not bring happy memories. They are the stuff of nightmares, dominated by memories of parents or loved ones fighting, deep disappointments,

heavy drinking, not enough money, sibling rivalry, resentment, anger, grief, being carted between divorced parents, or feelings of terrible loneliness and loss.

For those whose memories are not happy, Christmas-present may represent a chance to make a complete break from Christmases past. They are an opportunity to reinterpret the holiday and build new memories to replace the old ones.

John's version of the birth of Christ is a complete reinterpretation of the old, old, story traditionally read on Christmas Eve. In [John's Gospel](#), there is no visitation from an angel, no shepherds keeping their flocks by night, no star in the sky, no stable and manger, no mother and child.

In John's Gospel there's just the "Word."

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being" (John 1:1-3, NRSV).

As such, John's reinterpretation of the Christmas story provides a necessary corrective to the other gospel narratives about the birth of Jesus. It is a reinterpretation of the tradition that, while not a complete break from the other versions, is a part of the story that must be told if we are to fully understand what this season is about.

John's opening narrative is not about the birth of Jesus. Rather, it is about the birth of God into the world and God giving birth to the world. It is about God's creation of this world and all that is in it. It is about how in the beginning of time, the Word of God became flesh. It is about God incarnate, God with us, Emmanuel, in the person of Jesus the Christ.

It is about how, in the beginning, that same Word, that same flesh and blood person, that same man whose birth we just celebrated, was always with God, part of God, of the same being as God.

John starts with the premise that God created us and that part of that act of creation was God's Word, or message, or angle, or stamp, or intention, or idea, or ideal, or purpose, all of which he sums up as the Word.

Before there was anything, before creation, there was the Word.

The Word was there with God, all along, from the beginning. The Word was the same as God. The Word was God. The Word was the source of life itself, so that all of life has the genetic stamp of the Word built into it. It's in our DNA.

Because of the Word, all of life has not only a genetic stamp of the Word, but also a built-in awareness of the light that has come into the world. Human beings, who are created in God's

image, are endowed by our creator with a natural impulse to be followers of light instead of followers of shadow and despair.

God's creative activity and the work of the Word did and does not end with the act of causing the moon and stars, sun and earth, plants, animals, and people to come into being. All of these things come from the Word, but creation is not the end. God did not set it all into motion and then go away.

The Word became a human being. The Word was born, flesh and blood, and became a participant in the daily events and struggles of human life. The Word, which had already given the impulse to be followers of light, came to focus in one individual: Jesus Christ, full of grace and truth.

Because God sent God's only son into the world, we can live as children of the light. Because of Jesus, we can resist our human temptation to dwell in the shadows and fears and despair of the past. Because of Jesus, we can fight to improve the hand that the world has dealt us. Because of Jesus, our lives can be reinterpreted. We can be re-created, born again, and given a new life through Christ, who is God with us.

Because God has come to us in this way, we have a second chance to make things right. And a third, and a fourth, and a hundredth, if we need it. Because of Jesus, we have been given the opportunity to reinterpret our pasts and move toward a life lived in the light of truth and grace rather than a life overshadowed by the darkness of our painful memories and experiences.

The good news for today is the proclamation that the light has come into the world, full of grace and truth. The light of Christ is stronger than the powers of darkness and evil that threaten us. And the power of life in Christ Jesus is stronger than any memory, stronger than any setback, stronger than any evil that threatens us, stronger even than the power of death. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all the people. The light of Christ shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not, and will not ever, overcome it.

This is the promise that is born into the world through the birth of Jesus.

This is the hope, the love, the joy, and the peace of Christ.

This is the center of our celebration.

This is the reason we have the strength to go on.

This is why we can keep rewriting our life scripts, all the way into the life that is to come.

PLANNING NOTES

In This Series

In the three services of this season, we move from *Peace* (Christmas Eve) to **Word** (Christmas Day) to *Reveal* (Epiphany Sunday, next week). Peace is announced and celebrated as bold good news on Christmas Eve. The focus of the Christmas Day readings on Word moves us toward contemplation. Next week, we pick up the mood of wonder, love, and praise as well as

awareness of the threat the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ posed and poses to the powers of this world.

Today

Christmas Eve was just last night. Christmas Day is rarely celebrated at all in our churches. When it is, it may only be when it falls on a Sunday, as it does this year.

Attendance is likely to be low today. People may have stayed up late last evening celebrating with their families and friends, even after late Christmas Eve services. Many others will simply stay home or go out to breakfast this morning with their families and out of town guests. So whatever happens today may need to be in a more intimate mode than last night's celebration. Today's simple service of lessons, songs, and prayers with an act of thanksgiving rather than Communion and perhaps with a brief, more conversational homily, if any "sermon" at all, may help fit that bill.

Still, you may have some visitors as well as a few who have returned from or missed the Christmas Eve service and want to attend some sort of Christmas service. So be sure to be just as attentive to inviting **all** to worship next Sunday as well as the launch of your Season after Epiphany series. And plan to keep the invitations coming through the coming weeks as well.

EPIPHANY SUNDAY: REVEAL

[Music Notes](#)

[Preaching Notes](#)

[Planning Notes](#)

FULL SERVICE

ENTRANCE

If the church has a crèche, today is the day for the visitation of the wise men bearing gifts. Consider including an enactment of this, either as an opening processional while singing an appropriate song or two or three, or in preparation for the reading of the gospel lesson for today.

"We Three Kings"	UMH 254
"The First Noel"	UMH 245
"Star-Child"	TFWS 2095
"On This Day Earth Shall Ring"	UMH 248
"There's a Song in the Air"	UMH 249
"We Would See Jesus"	UMH 256

Prayer of Illumination

Brief spoken segue by the worship leader from last song directly to the readings

WORD AND RESPONSE

First Reading [Isaiah 60:1-6](#)

Hymn or Song

“O Morning Star, How Fair and Bright”

UMH 247 or

“Love Has Come”

W&S 3059

Second Reading [Ephesians 3:1-12](#)

Procession to the Crèche with Wise Men (if not done earlier)

Gospel [Matthew 2:1-12](#)

Sermon “Reveal”

Choral/Band Anthem

“A Star Shone Bright”

W&S 3051 or

“Jesus Saves”

(Hughes/Herbert, CCLI [Song Select](#)

#5322950)

Prayers of the People

Use “Jesus, the Light of the World” (W&S 3056 or Africana Hymnal 4038, or downloadable from [Onelicense.net](#)) as an ongoing refrain

Sing stanza 1 and chorus.

Play stanza while praying:

For all creation,

Rock and plasma, ice and water,

Stars, galaxies, and bosons,

And every form of life you have made:

Shining in the universe,

And shining in our hearts:

Hear our prayer, Lord Jesus.

Sing stanza 2 and chorus.

Play stanza while praying:

For leaders in every form of common life:

In nations, states, cities, towns, tribes,

companies great and small,

In congregations and denominations,

Especially for our bishop, (*Name*), our district superintendent (*Name*), and our pastor(s) and lay leader(s) (*Names*):

Shining in the universe,

Shining in our hearts,

Hear our prayer, Lord Jesus.

Sing stanza 3 and chorus.

Play stanza while praying:

For all who are in isolation

and all who suffer

because of sickness, injustice, loneliness, or prejudice;

Reveal your light in them

and in us,

And let your healing and delivering power flow through them

and through us:

Shining in the universe,

Shining in our hearts,

Hear our prayer, Lord Jesus.

Sing Chorus twice.

THANKSGIVING AND COMMUNION

Word and Table II for Invitation to the Table, Confession, Pardon and Peace

Offering

Offertory Music

“What Gift Can We Bring”

UMH 87

**Any of the selections based upon Epiphany that are not chosen for this Sunday would work well with the offering since the scriptural narrative involves a story of giving!*

Great Thanksgiving for Epiphany

[BOW 58-59](#)

Hymns During Communion

“Cuando El Pobre”/“When the Poor Ones”

UMH 434

“Some Children See Him”

W&S 3065

Thanksgiving after Communion

**Almighty God, we give you thanks for this holy mystery
in which you have revealed yourself to us.**

Send us out into the world

**to see and bear witness to your revelation in all things,
and invite all to come, taste and see your saving power;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**

Song of Sending

Sung to “Jesus, the Light of the World”

We go forth in Jesus’ name,

Jesus the light of the world;

Shining with the Spirit's gleam,
Jesus the light of the world.

Chorus twice.

Dismissal

Deacon or Lay Leader:

Go forth, behold the revelation,
And reveal it to one and all.

Jesus is the light of the world!

Christ in you is the hope of glory!

People: Be revealed in us, Lord Jesus!

Thanks be to God!

Postlude

MUSIC NOTES

We Three Kings

A favorite to sing for the observance of the Epiphany, this hymn tells the story of the magi and their visit to Jesus. In recent years, however, this hymn has fallen under a bit of scrutiny because of its declaration that there were three magi even though the gospel writer of Matthew doesn't assign a number. It is clear that the hymn writer assigned one per gift — gold, frankincense, and myrrh. This inaccuracy may need to be fleshed out more outside of worship because it doesn't necessarily make this hymn unsingable. The story itself (and its singing) is one children and adults both can and need to sing together. Keep in mind this is not a five-stanza hymn that can be trimmed down because stanzas 2-4 each address one of the gifts given to Jesus by the Magi.

The lilting time signature (3/8) gives this hymn a rocking feel that I have often pictured as of a "song for a journey." One of the best instruments to accompany this tune, other than an organ and/or piano, is a tambourine. It gives it an Eastern flair that can create a memorable effect on this day. [History of Hymns: http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-we-three-kings](http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-we-three-kings)

The First Noel

This traditional English carol is often thought of as a carol for Christmas Eve or Christmas Day, but it centers more upon the story of the Epiphany than the birth of Jesus. The refrain is news of Jesus' birth, and this news is shown in this hymn by the angel and the star. Unlike "We Three Kings," if you need to sing less than five stanzas (depending on its liturgical use), it is possible to

sing stanzas 1, 2, and 5 and still tell the story effectively. If it is possible, have your choir sing all four parts in the refrain throughout, and have the sopranos sing the tenor part of the refrain up one octave for a powerful descant on the final stanza.

Star-Child

Shirley Erena Murray and Carlton R. Young have teamed up to create a most poignant hymn of the Christmas season. This hymn is a proclamation of justice and reminds us that we are all children of God, no matter how old we are or in what situation we find ourselves. A [wonderful setting of this hymn](#) is available through its publisher, Hope Publishing Company (<https://is.gd/JaSOJ8>), and features multiple instruments for accompaniment, including handbells, winds, and piano. [History of Hymns:](#) <http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-star-child>

On This Day Earth Shall Ring

This melody may not be familiar for some churches, but rest assured it is a Christmas standard in many places. There is an inherent power in this text/melody combination, and the PERSONENT HODIE tune is exciting for keyboardists. Pronunciation of the Latin text is as follows: “ee-deh-oh glah-ree-ah een ek-shell-sees deh-oh.” If you have a handbell choir, there are many wonderful settings of this hymn available at handbellworld.com or ring-press.com. The tune has a distinct Renaissance-era character, so even if you sing this with organ or piano as the accompaniment, add a tambourine in a pattern with a quarter note on beats 1, 3, and 4, with two eighth notes on count 2 to create a spirited atmosphere.

There’s a Song in the Air

The star points to the news of Jesus’ birth in this beloved traditional Christmas hymn. Be sure to keep the tempo lively as a reminder that this “Song in the Air” is good news for all people! [History of Hymns:](#) <http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-theres-a-song-in-the-air>

We Would See Jesus

This text focuses upon the birth, childhood, and ministry of Jesus. Sometimes the broad scope of the narrative found in the hymn can prove difficult in finding a good time for its use in worship, but its inclusion of the Epiphany story provides one such occasion to sing it heartily. A new folk setting by Jackson Henry is also available: <http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/we-would-see-jesus>. In the first four stanzas, the melody is found in the bottom notes; but in the fifth stanza, the melody is found in the middle notes. The other harmony provided is optional. The tempo is very slow and is reminiscent of a slow, bluegrass ballad. [History of Hymns:](#) <http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-we-would-see-guides-us-from-nativity-to-epiphany>

O Morning Star, How Fair and Bright

This hymn has been sung for many years, and the tune has often been used as the central theme for other works (see Mendelssohn, “There Shall a Star Come Out of Jacob”). One of the longer hymn texts and tunes in our hymnal, it is an adventure to sing and requires the use of

the hymnal for aid. Though the first six-measure phrase is repeated, it is long enough that using a screen may not be helpful in the singing of this particular hymn. However, the setting in the hymnal is also a wonderful four-part choral setting by J. S. Bach, so you may even choose to use this hymn as a choral work in worship. [History of Hymns: http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-o-morning-star-how-fair-and-bright](http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-o-morning-star-how-fair-and-bright)

Love Has Come

Another notable hymn identifying Jesus as “Love,” this text and tune combination represent one of the best connections between Jesus as the Son of God and the Light of the World, which is a timely message for Epiphany. The last stanza addresses our modern context and the promise of Love as “the peace our hearts are seeking.” Pairing this with BRING A TORCH is a wonderful way to integrate a well-known tune into the worship life of the congregation. The range is well placed for the voice, and using a flute, violin, or oboe (or other treble clef instrument) to double the voices will give musical interest and vocal support. The accompaniment can easily be provided on organ, piano, or guitar.

A Star Shone Bright

F. Richard Garland has created an expression of Epiphany that links with this service, especially through the plea to “reveal to us your holy way.” Since most Christmas and Epiphany hymns are very Christocentric, this text provides an option, too, to focus upon the role of the Holy Spirit in our observation of this holy season. The setting of this text with O WALY WALY brings a tune not usually associated with Christmas and Epiphany, but the use of this familiar tune will help the congregation focus solely on the text. Accompany with any keyboard instrument or guitar, along with a solo or duo instrumental group playing an improvised descant or the soprano and alto parts up one octave. If your church has a choir, it would also be possible on the last stanza to have a two-part canon by having the second part echo by singing their first three eighth notes on the “and” of the downbeat in the first full measure. This places one part on a sustained half note while the other part sings the moving eighth notes in every phrase. [Hymn study: http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/a-star-shone-bright1](http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/a-star-shone-bright1)
[Musical score: http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/a-star-shone-bright](http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/a-star-shone-bright) or in *Worship & Song*.

Jesus Saves

This selection is well chosen for a band anthem. The range is very wide, and it would be best sung by a tenor who has a significant range to sing low and high. The same language that is incorporated by the hymn, “Love has come,” is also featured in this song, so it would be a great connection with the earlier hymn. Should you choose to sing this song with your congregation, I would recommend changing the key to A and singing the verse up one octave and then sing the chorus as written. When sung that way, the verse still resides within an acceptable part of the voice for congregational singing, and the transition to the chorus is seamless.

Jesus, the Light of the World

There are two versions of this song you can use to choose from when planning this service: *Worship & Song*, 3056, or *The Africana Hymnal*, 4038. The W&S setting incorporates a text by Ken Bible (who wrote “Love Has Come”) and focuses upon the imagery of the star. The version from *The Africana Hymnal* uses the text of “Hark, the Herald Angels Sing” along with the familiar refrain. Either setting is a great possibility for congregational singing. Don’t sing this song too quickly. It must have a slow, rocking character, which can be accomplished at a metronome marking of about 100-104. An organ (especially a Hammond!), piano, or gospel band can accompany this song with style. Should your choir want to sing this as an anthem or use the piece itself as the congregational song throughout the prayer, see this arrangement by André Thomas, published by Choristers Guild (CGA1063, <http://www.choristersguild.org/store/cga1063-walk-in-the-light-satb/120/>). It has a fairly advanced piano accompaniment, but you won’t regret using it if your pianist can play advanced repertoire. Hymn study: <http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/jesus-the-light-of-the-world>

What Gift Can We Bring

When singing this Jane Marshall hymn during the offering, it puts the congregation in the shoes of the magi when considering what gifts to present in support of the church and its mission. The hymn itself is a proclamation of thanksgiving and has the ability to be a gift itself: “This song we now offer in honor and praise!” The best accompaniment for this hymn is organ or piano. Simple guitar parts can also be created with a treble instrument to enhance the musical texture. History of Hymns: <http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-what-gift-can-we-bring>

Cuando El Pobre (When the Poor Ones)

Singing this beautiful hymn at the Epiphany creates an image of hospitality surrounding the holy family, welcoming the magi (the “strangers” that are alluded to in the text) into their humble home. The character of “Cuando El Pobre” is distinctly Spanish, and it should be sung longingly, yet hopefully. There are a number of ways to musically support the hymn, including a solo guitar, piano, and two flutes on soprano and alto parts. History of Hymns: <http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-when-the-poor-ones>

Some Children See Him

This Alfred Burt carol was chosen to be a part of the collection *Worship & Song* because of its poignancy, but also because of its level of familiarity within many congregations. Many of the colors used in this song, when taken out of context, could be seen as culturally insensitive. However, the presence of all the colors together with such a caring text can be a unifying element, too, celebrating diversity in ways in which many children can especially relate. This piece was originally intended as a solo with piano accompaniment, but despite its somewhat irregular 5/4-time signature, the singable phrases make this an accessible Christmas selection for congregations, too. If the E in the second phrase is too high, it is possible to sing this down one whole step in the key of E-flat, thus making the high note a D instead. Hymn study: <http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/some-children-see-him>

PREACHING NOTES

I love home improvement shows. From the oldies but goodies like “This Old House” and “Trading Spaces” to current popular shows like “Rehab Addict,” “Love It or List It,” “Flip or Flop,” “Fixer Upper,” and “House Hunters Renovation.” You name it! I love them all.

I think I first heard the word “reveal” used as a noun years ago on the show, “Trading Spaces.” The climax of the show was the reveal, or the tour by the homeowners and the cameras of the finished space after the renovation was completed. Everything that had happened in the show before this moment helped the viewer to anticipate, but not quite envision, the full picture of the finished space.

So if we want to cop this idea of the “reveal” and apply it to the Christian faith in terms of the person of Jesus Christ, we might point to Epiphany Sunday as the climactic moment of the annual Advent-Christmas-Epiphany cycle. For even though the story of the magi following the star to pay homage to the child Jesus may not, at first glance, seem like the first moment in which we see the “reveal,” that’s exactly what it is. Why? Because the reveal in this high holy season is **not** the birth of Jesus. It is the confirmation of his true identity.

SIDEBAR: Epiphany, Theophany, and Baptism of the Lord by Taylor Burton-Edwards

We expect to hear about and see images of the wise men in association with Epiphany, as well, perhaps, as Christmas Eve or Christmas Day. You might expect to find many such images in paint, sculpture, or living pageants. Some churches may even have statuary depicting them.

But there’s one other place the magi show up with significant frequency in churches, East and West, from about the fifth century on: baptismal fonts!

Why magi on baptismal fonts? Because the earliest celebrations of the Feast of Epiphany (or Theophany in the Orthodox churches) celebrated both the birth of Christ and the baptism of Christ. Indeed, part of the purpose of the day was to draw a straight line between Christ’s birth and his baptism, his incarnation and the declaration by the voice from heaven that he is the Son of God. The waters of his birth and the waters of his baptism are one.

In the Eastern Church (Orthodox), the Feast of Theophany also thus includes one other element: The Blessing of the Waters. This is an additional ritual that follows after the main celebration of the Feast of Epiphany at the principal morning service, and is often done outdoors at a nearby stream of water, particularly one that is a source of water for that area. The water is then liberally shared with all around, both by sprinkling the people and encouraging people to take the blessed waters to drink. The idea is the manifestation or appearing of God (Epiphany/Theophany) in Jesus Christ is the definitive sign that God indeed intends to redeem the whole of creation, not just sinful humankind, and pour out mercy and compassion on all. To learn more about the observance of Theophany in the Orthodox Church,

see <https://oca.org/orthodoxy/the-orthodox-faith/worship/the-church-year/epiphany>.

END SIDEBAR

In the past, when I have read this [Scripture](#), I have been, at various times, focused on the professions of the magi, or the science of the star, or the purpose of the dream, or Herod's strange behavior, or the gifts. But this time around, I want to focus on the **response** of the magi.

From the text, we know that these men from the east observed a star rising in the sky. They knew this star signaled the birth of a king, and not just any king, but specifically the king of the Jews.

I don't know how they knew this. We can read speculation from scholars and experts on the subject. We can mine the history of astrology. We can explain it as the work of hindsight on the part of the author of Matthew's Gospel. We can attribute it to science, or prophecy, or eastern religion. But the fact is, we don't know exactly how they knew. We know only what Matthew tells us: they saw a star rising and they hit the road for Jerusalem, bearing gifts, to pay homage to the newly-born king of the Jews.

SIDEBAR: "THE STAR IN THE EAST"

By Taylor Burton-Edwards

The way we understand and teach how the stars participate in the story of the coming of the magi can be either a stumbling block to a skeptical world or a point of revelation and wonder.

The way this story is often popularly told, the magi see the star in the sky, and then use it to navigate first to Jerusalem and then to the home where Jesus was. The star is often pictured as moving about in the sky (a rather "un-star-like" behavior) like a GPS indicator, and the magi are pictured as following the star where it leads.

We know this isn't how stars behave, at all. It's not even how planets (the word planet literally means "wanderer") behave.

So did the writers of the New Testament, and so did Zoroastrian astrologers at the time.

So rather than continuing to tell this story as if the star were like a GPS indicator, and so making the whole thing seem foolish to modern (or even ancient) ears, be sure to pay closer attention to what the Bible actually says and how that dovetails with ancient astrological understandings, and even with modern science.

What the Bible portrays is that a star signaling the birth of a king in Judea according to then-current astrological understandings had appeared in the night sky. The magi followed the star at this point only in the sense that the star indicated Judea as the location of the birth. They crossed the Arabian desert from somewhere in the East (Baghdad or Tehran?) and went to Jerusalem, the capital of Judea, considering it as the most likely place either to find him or to

learn more. Indeed, when they report why and how they've come to Jerusalem, they say nothing of "following the star" at all. They tell Herod and others only that they had seen "his star at its rising" (Matthew 2:3) and therefore headed to Jerusalem. They did learn more in Jerusalem, not from the star, but from scribes who related the prophecy of the birth of a messiah (a new David) in Bethlehem (David's hometown).

Herod, not the star, sent them to Bethlehem. The Greek in Matthew 2:9 could be translated either "the star went ahead of them" or "the star led them." In the first case, the language is mostly likely astrological. The star was moving relative to the other constellations as they made their journey from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. In the second case, it means they were still tracking the same star as some sort of point of reference for *meaning*, if not precise location.

When they arrived in Bethlehem, they started looking for the child. On one of those evenings, they observed the star "was stationed above where the child was" (2:9). The key phrase here is "where the child was."

This curious phrase likely doesn't mean the star was seen directly above any one particular house as opposed to any other house in the small town of Bethlehem. The distances are too great for that precise a reckoning of location from the constellations in the sky to a particular point on earth. And they would have known that.

The far more likely meaning, given that they were astrologers, would have to do with the relative position of the star they had been tracking with respect to the "houses" named in their astrology. So the star they were tracking was, at a particular point, positioned above "where the child was," i.e. above the "house of the child," or Scorpio, as we may call that constellation. (See a description of the division of houses in Zoroastrian astrology: <http://zoroastrianastrology.blogspot.com/p/world-horoscope.html>.) The second meaning points to them seeing the star *in this position* when they arrived where Jesus was. That they rejoiced greatly to see the star (verse 10) probably indicates the star did not simply "stop" (i.e., stop shining, though that is also a possible translation). The position of the star relative to the constellations when they arrived at the home of Jesus indicated to the magi that what the star and its location were pointing to (a newborn King of Judea) was now directly before them in the physical house they had come to. There, they offered their gifts and their homage to Jesus.

END SIDEBAR

Likewise, we don't know why they made a detour to inform Herod about their actions. All we know is that they did this, and the news frightened not only Herod, but "all of Jerusalem with him," so that Herod called all of his experts together to gather information on exactly who this child was and what his birth might mean for his empire. And after he had consulted his own experts, he summoned the magi back for a second conversation, presumably so he could compare the information he had received from his own people to the information being provided by these outsiders.

He then told the magi an outright lie. He sent them forth to visit the child with instructions to let him know exactly where the baby was located so that he too could pay homage to the newborn king.

And so the men continued on their way to Bethlehem, following the star to the exact spot where the baby lay. Matthew tells us when they entered the house where Jesus and his family were staying, they were overwhelmed with joy. They knelt before him and presented him with gifts. After the visit, they left for their own country “by another road.” Again, we don’t know why. We can conclude from the story that they took a different route in order to protect the child from Herod, but Matthew doesn’t say that directly. All he says is that they were “warned in a dream” not to return to Herod, and just like Joseph in the story from an earlier chapter, they acted on that dream as if it were real.

So that is all we really know. These are the hints, the clues, the glimpses into the meaning of the visit of the magi from the East. The question is, what is the big reveal offered by way of this story? What picture of completion does it provide for the readers of Matthew’s Gospel? What does it tell us about who Jesus really is?

I think that in the same way the design details in a renovation project ultimately make or break the project, so the powerful verbs in this passage are what make the big reveal in this story: observed, came, pay homage, frighten, search, find, set out, stopped, knelt, offered, warned, left. These strong action words reveal a direct progression from belief and action to confirmation and response.

Although the magi follow a completely different belief system from that of the family of Jesus, or even the people of Herod’s empire, the signs they see through the window of their own religious worldview compel them to *respond* to the beliefs of this other faith tradition. Not only that, they see in this other religious tradition that in this child the divine is not just present, but powerful. Seeing Jesus for themselves not only confirms that he is indeed the one of whom the prophets spoke, but that the sign they read in the sky had led them to something very real and something very joyful. They experience the divine presence and power personally. And they respond by kneeling down before him; that is, essentially, worshiping him.

What has happened in your life that led to the “big reveal” that Jesus Christ was your Lord and Savior?

How can you help people from other belief systems, especially those who have rejected organized religion in general or the Christian faith in particular, experience a reveal that confirms for them Jesus Christ is Lord?

How can you reveal Jesus to these seekers in the style they prefer, the language they use, and with authentic respect for their present spiritual belief system, no matter what it is?

What signs from the world around you can you point to that reveal the presence and power of Christ at work, and that might lead others to act in response to the beliefs of the Christian faith?

Why is this moment the big “reveal?” What good news does it proclaim?

It is a public acknowledgement by those who are very much outsiders that Jesus is Lord. It is a confirmation that all the earth must bow down to him. It is confirmation that the heavens cooperate to identify him. It is confirmation that religious leaders from other lands not only recognize him as the king of the Jews, but respond to him as a divine presence in the world. It is confirmation that his power frightens those in worldly power. If Jesus can be revealed as Lord to leaders from another religious tradition, then the Lordship of Jesus can be revealed to anyone in the whole world!

What is our response to the good news that Jesus is King?

How have our lives been changed, and how are our lives still being transformed, by the big reveal that Jesus Christ is Lord?

As our series comes to a close, be sure to take a moment to give a preview of the next series, which kicks off a week from today and invite folks to come back. Having recognized in the big reveal that Jesus Christ is Lord, over the next eight weeks, we will begin living into the new reality of his Lordship as we invite others to “Come and See” this man we call our Savior.

This series will be focused on introducing Jesus to people who do not yet know him, or reintroducing him to people who have known him in the past but in recent years have fallen away from their relationship with him. We hope that you will use this series as an evangelistic effort to start the new year. We want you to strongly encourage the members of your congregation to invite someone they know who does not have a church home to “come and see” the Jesus that drew the first disciples to him and to “come and see” what his early ministry was all about! Remember, this is the time in Jesus’ life when all manner of people flocked to hear him teach and experience or witness his healing power.

Make sure that your congregation knows that it is their responsibility as well as yours to share the good news they have come to know in Jesus Christ. Tell them to bring a friend to church, and plan to get your “A-game” on as you prepare preach the amazing good news for the Season after Epiphany!

PLANNING NOTES

In the Series

Today marks the conclusion of the Advent-Christmas series. Each series’ conclusion needs to do two things: (1) deliver in a strong way on the whole series promise, and (2) make a segue and offer a preview of the upcoming series.

This flow of this series has been *Watch, Turn, See, Dream, Peace, Word, and Reveal*. We started in Advent with anticipation of a revelation to come. Today, we celebrate what has been revealed in the first coming of Jesus Christ and the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit through and beyond Christ's body, the church. We have moved from fearful hope, through repentance, toward experiencing the world and God's hope for the world in new ways. While the incarnation also unleashes threat into the world, threat against the continuing hegemony of entrenched powers that resist the saving way and work of God, it also unleashes a hope and celebration so massive that the universe itself declares Christ's birth in ways that move Zoroastrian astrologers to journey hundreds of miles across the Arabian desert to pay him homage.

The upcoming series (Season after Epiphany) supports the church in a season of evangelism, inviting people to "come and see" what Jesus and his call to discipleship are about and to be prepared more fully to live as disciples through the season of Lent that follows.

Today

Because this year's celebration of Epiphany falls during the Christmas holidays, and right after New Year's Eve, attendance at worship may be hard to predict today. But that is no reason not to celebrate the revelation of God in Jesus Christ to the wider world, even acknowledged by the universe, today. Indeed, today's gospel reading makes for a great New Year's kickoff.

Keep in mind that the *effective* kickoff for newcomers for your next series may be in two weeks rather than next week (Baptism of the Lord). Next week's celebration may be appropriately primarily focused on people who are in a position to reaffirm the baptismal covenant as well, perhaps, as the Wesley covenant, rather than on newcomers being invited to come and see what discipleship to Jesus among you may be all about.

Procession to the Crèche with the Wise Men

In the order of Scriptures we use for the Christmas season, we tell the story of the shepherds on Christmas Eve and the story of the coming of the magi on Epiphany. If your congregation has a crèche (nativity scene), today would be a good day for people dressed as wise men (possibly children) to bring magi figurines to the crèche and present them there. This may be offered at the beginning of the service, accompanied by the singing of "We Three Kings" (if desired) or done with singing or in reverent silence as an introduction to the reading of the gospel.