

Cultivating Love through Hope
An order of worship for mid-week Advent services
For Advent 2024

Overview of the Resource

The Nebraska Synod has embarked upon a theme of “Cultivating Love” for the 2024-2025 ministry year. Enclosed in this resource are worship outlines for a possible order of service for the congregations of the Nebraska Synod to go a little deeper with this theme during the Advent season this year. Particularly, this Advent as a synod we are committed to ponder and cultivate love through hope. This theme focus shapes and guides the suggestions that follow.

There are three separate outlines, designed to be used for the three Wednesday evenings during Advent. These service orders include suggested liturgy; readings and prayers; questions for reflection, discussion or preaching; and hymns and worship songs. There is an additional outline for a theme related “Longest Night/Blue Christmas” service liturgy, which would be particularly appropriate for December 20 or 21.

The spoken liturgy has been adapted from various sources. These include, but are not limited to, *All Creation Sings* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2020), and especially Setting 12, as well as “Watch, O Lord,” by Marty Haugen with a prayer attributed to Augustine, found in hymn 996; and *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), and especially the lyrics found in hymn 257, “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.” The suggested readings come from Isaiah and Luke, with a suggested reading from each book, so that there might be two scripture readings in each service. All suggested hymnody is available to download from *Sundays and Seasons*. If your congregation does not have a particular hymnal, other hymn options are provided from the various hymnals in use within the ELCA.

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Hope for the Resource and Your Faith Community

Everything in this resource is meant to be adapted, to make it be of best use and contextually relevant in your own faith community. Please adapt, amend, and change as desired. The hope in offering such a resource is that it provides another opportunity for us as the Nebraska Synod to gather and worship God in Christ around a common theme. But to also provide an opportunity to be intentional as disciples, to lean in, and to embody God’s love and hope for us and for all. It is designed to be accessible and useful in any faith community, and particularly, to be of help in a congregational setting that might be without a regular pastoral leader at the moment.

If you have any questions or would like to share stories about how you are using this resource, please reach out to Deacon Timothy Siburg at timothy@nebraskasynod.org.

On behalf of the whole Nebraska Synod staff, this resource is offered in deep hope for a meaningful Advent and Christmas season in your congregation and larger communities.

In deep hope and with God’s blessings and peace,
Deacon Timothy Siburg

Cultivating Love through Hope
An order of worship for mid-week Advent services
For the congregations of the Nebraska Synod
For Advent 2024

Week One- (most appropriate for Wednesday December 4)

Prelude (or gather in silence)

Advent Wreath Litany

L: We gather this evening to light the first candle of our Advent journey.

C: O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear.

The first candle is lit.

L: As the light shines and the darkness cannot overcome it, we trust in the hope of the One to come through whom we cultivate love for one another, our neighbors, and for God.

C: Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to you, O Israel.

Confession and Forgiveness

L: Blessed be the holy Trinity, + one God, creator of the stars of night, companion on the Advent journey, breath over the deep waters.

C: Amen.

L: Let us confess our sin in the presence of God and of one another.

Silence is kept for reflection

L: Holy and gracious God,

C: we confess that we have sinned against you this day. Some of our sin we know- the thoughts and words and deeds of which we are ashamed- but some is known only to you. In the name of Jesus Christ we ask forgiveness. Deliver and restore us, that we may rest this night in peace. Amen.

L: By the mercy of God we are united with Jesus Christ in whom we are forgiven. We rest now in the peace of Christ and rise in the morning to serve.

C: Amen.

Gathering Song:

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel (v. 1)

ELW 257/LBW 34

*O come, O come, Emmanuel,
and ransom captive Israel,
that mourns in lonely exile here
until the Son of God appear.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
shall come to you, O Israel.*

L: The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, the love of Christ that guards our hearts and minds, and the joy and consolation of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

C: And also with you.

Prayer of the Day:

L: Let us pray. Stir up our hearts, O God, to prepare a pathway for your Christ and to live in hope. By his coming speak peace to your people and turn our hearts towards you, that your saving grace and splendid glory may dwell in all the earth; through Jesus Christ, whose day draws near.

C: Amen.

The Word:**The First Lesson: Isaiah 7:10-25**

“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel” (Isaiah 7:14, NRSV).

Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying, ¹¹Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. ¹²But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test. ¹³Then Isaiah said: “Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? ¹⁴Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. ¹⁵He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. ¹⁶For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.

¹⁷The LORD will bring on you and on your people and on your ancestral house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah—the king of Assyria.” ¹⁸On that day the LORD will whistle for the fly that is at the sources of the streams of Egypt, and for the bee that is in the land of Assyria. ¹⁹And they will all come and settle in the steep ravines, and in the clefts of the rocks, and on all the thornbushes, and on all the pastures. ²⁰On that day the Lord will shave with a razor hired beyond the River—with the king of Assyria—the head and the hair of the feet, and it will take off the beard as well. ²¹On that day one will keep alive a young cow and two sheep, ²²and will eat curds because of the abundance of milk that they give; for everyone that is left in the land shall eat curds and honey. ²³On that day every place where there used to be a thousand vines, worth a thousand shekels of silver, will become briers and thorns. ²⁴With bow and arrows one will go there, for all the land will be briers and thorns; ²⁵and as for all the hills that used to be hoed with a hoe, you will not go there for fear of briers and thorns; but they will become a place where cattle are let loose and where sheep tread.

Gospel Acclamation:**Wait for the Lord****ELW 262***or: O Lord, How Shall I Meet You (vs. 1)***LBW 23/ELW 241****Gospel Reading: Luke 1:13-25**

But the angel said to him, ‘Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. ¹⁴You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. ¹⁶He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.’ ¹⁸Zechariah said to the angel, ‘How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.’ ¹⁹The angel replied, ‘I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. ²⁰But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.’

²¹Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. ²²When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. ²³When his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

24 After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, ²⁵'This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.'

Sermon/Meditation/Pastoral Reflection/Conversation

Questions for Reflection, preaching or conversation:

- What hope do you hear in the prophet Isaiah's words this week?
- How might this experience for Zechariah and Elizabeth, bring them hope? How might it cultivate hope for others?
- What are two or three ways that you will cultivate hope this season? How might these ways bring hope to you? To others?

Sermon Hymn:

All Earth is Hopeful

ELW 266/WOV 629

Prayers of Intercession: *The prayers may be prayed as follows or sung using "There is a Longing in Our Hearts" ACS #1078.*

L: In Christ Jesus we meet the God who knows our weakness and our deep yearning for hope, and who bears the wounds of the world. Therefore, let us be bold as we pray, trusting that God draws near to those in any kind of need.

Silence for reflection

L: God of Hope, open our eyes to your signs. Help us to see You, and to see all that You would have us see- so that we might not only be filled with hope, but that we can help cultivate hope in and for our neighbors. We pray,

C: Come, Lord Jesus.

L: God of Love, open our hands, hearts, and our whole selves to you. Help us to share your love, and in the examples of Zechariah and Elizabeth, to proclaim your love through word and deed. Help us to cultivate love through hope this season. We pray,

C: Come, Lord Jesus.

L: God of Healing and Wholeness, be with all those in need. Tend your ailing ones, rest your weary ones, bless your dying ones, soothe your suffering ones, and heal your afflicted ones. This night we pray especially for _____(names may be prayed aloud by the congregation or said silently in one's hearts)_____.

Hold them in your deep mercy and love as signs of your gracious promise and presence. We pray,

C: Come, Lord Jesus.

L: God of Peace, be with us and be with all your children. For those who are grieving, worn down, and those who are looking for peace and purpose. Be with those uncertain of where their next meal or bed may come. Be with those worried this night and be with those who are filled with joy too. Help us share your peace. We pray,

C: Come, Lord Jesus.

OTHER PETITIONS MAY BE OFFERED HERE

L: Stir up your power, Lord Christ, and come. In your mercy receive our prayers, and by your power hasten the day when peace and justice kiss and steadfast love and faithfulness meet for the sake of the world you love.

C: Amen.

Sharing of the Peace

L: The peace of Christ be with you always.

C: And also with you.

The peace may be shared by all with one another.

P: Now, to help support the work of the people of God, let us receive an offering- of our time, selves, and gifts.

Offering

Offering Song

My Soul Proclaims Your Greatness

ELW 251/WOV 730

Offertory Prayer

L: Let us pray. Abiding God, under the cover of darkness, you bring forth life. Nourish us with earth's bounty, that we may freely share the gifts you have first given us, through the one who gives his life for the world, Jesus Christ, our risen Savior.

C: Amen.

Lord's Prayer

L: Gathered into one by the Holy Spirit, let us pray as Jesus taught us.

C: Our Father...

Benediction

L: The God of hope fill us with all joy and peace in believing, so that we may abound in and cultivate hope by the power of the Holy Spirit, through Christ Jesus for whom we wait.

C: Amen.

Closing Song:

In A Far-Off Place, Jesus Comes

ACS 908

Or: Comfort, Comfort Now My People LBW 29/ELW 256

Dismissal

L: Go in peace and rest, cultivating hope and love for all the world.

C: Thanks be to God, we will.

Postlude (or depart in silence)

Week Two- (most appropriate for Wednesday December 11)

Prelude (or gather in silence)

Advent Wreath Litany

L: We gather this evening to light two candles of our Advent journey.

C: O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear.

The first candle is lit.

C: O come, O Wisdom from on high, embracing all things far and nigh: in strength and beauty come and stay; teach us your will and guide our way.

The second candle is lit

L: As the lights shine and the darkness cannot overcome it, we trust in the hope of the One to come through whom we cultivate love for one another, our neighbors, and for God.

C: Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to you, O Israel.

Confession and Forgiveness

L: Blessed be the holy Trinity, + one God, creator of the stars of night, companion on the Advent journey, breath over the deep waters.

C: Amen.

L: Let us confess our sin in the presence of God and of one another.

Silence is kept for reflection

L: Holy and gracious God,

C: we confess that we have sinned against you this day. Some of our sin we know- the thoughts and words and deeds of which we are ashamed- but some is known only to you. In the name of Jesus Christ we ask forgiveness. Deliver and restore us, that we may rest this night in peace. Amen.

L: By the mercy of God we are united with Jesus Christ in whom we are forgiven. We rest now in the peace of Christ and rise in the morning to serve.

C: Amen.

Gathering Song:

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel (v. 1 & 2)

ELW 257/LBW 34

*O come, O come, Emmanuel,
and ransom captive Israel,
that mourns in lonely exile here
until the Son of God appear.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
shall come to you, O Israel.*

*O come, O Wisdom from on high,
embracing all things far and nigh:
in strength and beauty come and stay;
teach us your will and guide our way.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
shall come to you, O Israel.*

L: The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, the love of Christ that guards our hearts and minds, and the joy and consolation of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

C: And also with you.

Evening Canticle:

Blessed Be the God of Israel

ELW 250/WOV 725

Prayer of the Day:

L: Let us pray. Stir up our hearts, O God, to prepare a pathway for your Christ and to live in hope. By his coming speak peace to your people and turn our hearts towards you, that your saving grace and splendid glory may dwell in all the earth; through Jesus Christ, whose day draws near.

C: Amen.

The Word:

The First Lesson: Isaiah 9:2-7

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined” (Isaiah 9:2, NRSV)

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined. ³You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. ⁴For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. ⁵For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. ⁶For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. ⁷His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

Gospel Acclamation:

Wait for the Lord

ELW 262

or: O Lord, How Shall I Meet You (vs. 1) LBW 23/ELW 241

Gospel Reading: Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. ²⁸And he came to her and said, ‘Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.’ ²⁹But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰The angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³²He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.’ ³⁴Mary said to the angel, ‘How can this be, since I am a virgin?’ ³⁵The angel said to her, ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. ³⁶And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God.’ ³⁸Then Mary said, ‘Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.’ Then the angel departed from her.

Sermon/Meditation/Pastoral Reflection/Conversation

Questions for Reflection, preaching or conversation:

- What hope do you hear in the prophet Isaiah’s words this week?
- How might light shine in the darkness as signs of God’s hope being cultivated today?
- How might this experience for Mary bring her hope? How might it cultivate hope for others?

- What are two or three ways that you will cultivate hope this season? How might these ways bring hope to you? To others?

Sermon Hymn:

Rejoice, Rejoice, Believers

ELW 244/LBW 25

Prayers of Intercession: *The prayers may be prayed as follows or sung using “There is a Longing in Our Hearts” ACS #1078.*

L: In Christ Jesus we meet the God who knows our weakness and our deep yearning for hope, and who bears the wounds of the world. Therefore, let us be bold as we pray, trusting that God draws near to those in any kind of need.

Silence for reflection

L: God of Hope, help us to notice your light and to share it through all that we have and all that we are, with the world. Help us to live in your light as bearers of peace and justice, and as signs of your love and faithfulness. Help us be bearers of your light so that we can cultivate hope in and for our neighbors. We pray,

C: Come, Lord Jesus.

L: God of Love, open our hearts and give us good courage. Help us to respond like Mary to your invitation- so that through our lives, your love and hope might be known. And that together we can cultivate love through hope this season. We pray,

C: Come, Lord Jesus.

L: God of Healing and Wholeness, be with all those in need. Hold your grieving ones, raise your fallen ones, mend your broken ones, guard your little ones, and guide your searching ones. This night we pray especially for ____ (*names may be prayed aloud by the congregation or said silently in one’s hearts*) ____.

Hold them in your deep mercy and love as signs of your gracious promise and presence. We pray,

C: Come, Lord Jesus.

L: God of Peace, be with us and be with all your children. Be with those near and far afraid this night- for fear of conflict, war, or rumors of war. Be with those who find themselves caught among divisions of any kind. And be with all those who are looking for peace and purpose. Help us share your peace. We pray,

C: Come, Lord Jesus.

OTHER PETITIONS MAY BE OFFERED HERE

L: Stir up your power, Lord Christ, and come. In your mercy receive our prayers, and by your power hasten the day when peace and justice kiss and steadfast love and faithfulness meet for the sake of the world you love.

C: Amen.

Sharing of the Peace

L: The peace of Christ be with you always.

C: And also with you.

The peace may be shared by all with one another.

P: Now, to help support the work of the people of God, let us receive an offering- of our time, selves, and gifts.

Offering

Offering Song

My Soul Proclaims Your Greatness

ELW 251/WOV 730

Offertory Prayer

L: Let us pray. Abiding God, under the cover of darkness, you bring forth life. Nourish us with earth's bounty, that we may freely share the gifts you have first given us, through the one who gives his life for the world, Jesus Christ, our risen Savior.

C: Amen.

Lord's Prayer

L: Gathered into one by the Holy Spirit, let us pray as Jesus taught us.

C: Our Father...

Benediction

L: The God of hope fill us with all joy and peace in believing, so that we may abound in and cultivate hope by the power of the Holy Spirit, through Christ Jesus for whom we wait.

C: Amen.

Closing Song:

In A Far-Off Place, Jesus Comes

ACS 908

Or: Comfort, Comfort Now My People

LBW 29/ELW 256

Dismissal

L: Go in peace and rest, cultivating hope and love for all the world.

C: Thanks be to God, we will.

Postlude (or depart in silence)

Week Three- (most appropriate for Wednesday December 18)

Prelude (or gather in silence)

Advent Wreath Litany

L: We gather this evening to light three candles of our Advent journey.

C: O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear.

The first candle is lit.

C: O come, O Wisdom from on high, embracing all things far and nigh: in strength and beauty come and stay; teach us your will and guide our way.

The second candle is lit

C: O come, O King of nations, come, O Cornerstone that binds in one: refresh the hearts that long for you; restore the broken, make us new.

The third candle is lit

L: As the lights shine and the darkness cannot overcome it, we trust in the hope of the One to come through whom we cultivate love for one another, our neighbors, and for God.

C: Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to you, O Israel.

Confession and Forgiveness

L: Blessed be the holy Trinity, + one God, creator of the stars of night, companion on the Advent journey, breath over the deep waters.

C: Amen.

L: Let us confess our sin in the presence of God and of one another.

Silence is kept for reflection

L: Holy and gracious God,

C: we confess that we have sinned against you this day. Some of our sin we know- the thoughts and words and deeds of which we are ashamed- but some is known only to you. In the name of Jesus Christ we ask forgiveness. Deliver and restore us, that we may rest this night in peace. Amen.

L: By the mercy of God we are united with Jesus Christ in whom we are forgiven. We rest now in the peace of Christ and rise in the morning to serve.

C: Amen.

Gathering Song:

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel (v. 1, 2, 7)

ELW 257/LBW 34

*O come, O come, Emmanuel,
and ransom captive Israel,
that mourns in lonely exile here
until the Son of God appear.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
shall come to you, O Israel.*

*O come, O Wisdom from on high,
embracing all things far and nigh:
in strength and beauty come and stay;
teach us your will and guide our way.*

*Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
shall come to you, O Israel.*

*O come, O King of nations, come,
O Cornerstone that binds in one:
refresh the hearts that long for you;
restore the broken, make us new.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
shall come to you, O Israel.*

L: The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, the love of Christ that guards our hearts and minds, and the joy and consolation of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

C: And also with you.

Evening Canticle:

Blessed Be the God of Israel

ELW 250/WOV 725

Prayer of the Day:

L: Let us pray. Stir up our hearts, O God, to prepare a pathway for your Christ and to live in hope. By his coming speak peace to your people and turn our hearts towards you, that your saving grace and splendid glory may dwell in all the earth; through Jesus Christ, whose day draws near.

C: Amen.

The Word:

The First Lesson: Isaiah 40:3-5, 28-31

“Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken” (Isaiah 40:4-5, NRSV).

³ A voice cries out:

‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.

⁵ Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.’

²⁸ Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.

He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable.

²⁹ He gives power to the faint,
and strengthens the powerless.

³⁰ Even youths will faint and be weary,
and the young will fall exhausted;

³¹ but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,

they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.

Gospel Acclamation:

Wait for the Lord

ELW 262

or: O Lord, How Shall I Meet You (vs. 1) LBW 23/ELW 241

Gospel Reading: Luke 1:46-56, 67-80

46 And Mary said,
'My soul magnifies the Lord,
47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
48 for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
50 His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
51 He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
53 he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
54 He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.'
56 And Mary remained with her for about three months and then returned to her home.

67 Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy:
68 'Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.
69 He has raised up a mighty savior for us
in the house of his servant David,
70 as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
71 that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.
72 Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,
and has remembered his holy covenant,
73 the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,
to grant us ⁷⁴that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,
might serve him without fear, ⁷⁵in holiness and righteousness
before him all our days.
76 And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
77 to give knowledge of salvation to his people
by the forgiveness of their sins.
78 By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
79 to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.'

80 The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.

Sermon/Meditation/Pastoral Reflection/Conversation

Questions for Reflection, preaching or conversation:

- What hope do you hear in the prophet Isaiah's words this week?
- How might these experiences for Mary, Zechariah, and Elizabeth bring each of them hope? How might it cultivate hope for others?
- As we enter into the final week of Advent before Christmas, in what ways have you cultivated hope this season? How might you cultivate hope for yourself and others in the week ahead?

Sermon Hymn:

Prepare the Royal Highway

ELW 264/LBW 26

Prayers of Intercession: *The prayers may be prayed as follows or sung using "There is a Longing in Our Hearts" ACS #1078.*

L: In Christ Jesus we meet the God who knows our weakness and our deep yearning for hope, and who bears the wounds of the world. Therefore, let us be bold as we pray, trusting that God draws near to those in any kind of need.

Silence for reflection

L: God of Hope, lift up our weary heads. Help us see your good and beloved creation, and your promises and love fulfilled. Help us to witness your glory revealed through valleys lifted up, mountains made low, uneven ground made level, and rough places plain. Bring us together as your beloved, so that together we might cultivate hope. We pray,

C: Come, Lord Jesus.

L: God of Love, help us to sing with Mary and Zechariah. To sing of Your abundant love made known through your promises, and provision of food for the hungry, the lifting up of the lowly, and the witness to your tender mercy which breaks upon us each new day. Help us to cultivate love through hope this season. We pray,

C: Come, Lord Jesus.

L: God of Healing and Wholeness, as the nights grow longer and the days become colder, hold us in the warmth of your deep embrace. Heal our brokenness and divisions of all kinds. Bring us together as your people. Restore us to peace, so that we might not just have hope, but that we together might bear your love. That love calls us to see our neighbors in need near and far. This night, we especially pray for our siblings and neighbors, including _____ (*names may be prayed aloud by the congregation or said silently in one's hearts*)_____. Hold them in your deep mercy and love as signs of your gracious promise and presence. We pray,

C: Come, Lord Jesus.

L: God of Peace, we remember the words of Zechariah this night. As he proclaims, we too pray in hope, "By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet in the way of peace." May it be so, we pray.

C: Come, Lord Jesus.

OTHER PETITIONS MAY BE OFFERED HERE

L: Stir up your power, Lord Christ, and come. In your mercy receive our prayers, and by your power hasten the day when peace and justice kiss and steadfast love and faithfulness meet for the sake of the world you love.

C: Amen.

Sharing of the Peace

L: The peace of Christ be with you always.

C: And also with you.

The peace may be shared by all with one another.

P: Now, to help support the work of the people of God, let us receive an offering- of our time, selves, and gifts.

Offering

Offering Song

My Soul Proclaims Your Greatness

ELW 251/WOV 730

Offertory Prayer

L: Let us pray. Abiding God, under the cover of darkness, you bring forth life. Nourish us with earth's bounty, that we may freely share the gifts you have first given us, through the one who gives his life for the world, Jesus Christ, our risen Savior.

C: Amen.

Lord's Prayer

L: Gathered into one by the Holy Spirit, let us pray as Jesus taught us.

C: Our Father...

Benediction

L: The God of hope fill us with all joy and peace in believing, so that we may abound in and cultivate hope by the power of the Holy Spirit, through Christ Jesus for whom we wait.

C: Amen.

Closing Song:

In A Far-Off Place, Jesus Comes

ACS 908

Or: Comfort, Comfort Now My People

LBW 29/ELW 256

Dismissal

L: Go in peace and rest, cultivating hope and love for all the world.

C: Thanks be to God, we will.

Postlude (or depart in silence)

Cultivating Love through Hope
A Longest Night/Blue Christmas Service Liturgy
(particularly appropriate for December 20 or 21)

A musical prelude may be offered, or all may gather in silence.

Gathering and Preparation

P: We gather this evening in the name of † Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

C: Amen.

Announcements and Instructions

If there are any announcements for the good of the community or instructions needed to be shared for worship, this is a good time to share them.

P: As we await Christ's birth, we remember that God is with us and meets us where we are at. The babe who was in the manger, God Incarnate, is God's gift of deep love for us. We are invited now to pause, be still, and be fully present in this holy season. The world around us and society at large may call us to a different place- where busyness, spending, and rushing all about are marks of success and where we are never enough and always behind. But God, in Christ, offers us real hope through another way: Emmanuel- God with us.

Call to Worship – *based on John 1*

P: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

C: The Word became flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth, and we have seen his glory.

P: In him was life, and that life was the light of all.

C: The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has never been able to extinguish it.

Opening Hymn: "O Little Town of Bethlehem"

ELW 279 (v. 1 & 3)/LBW 41

Welcome and Opening Litany

P: Christmas always seems to be accompanied by jolly songs, ringing bells, and the expectation that you will have a good time. But that's not how it feels for many people. Maybe your year has been hard, and Christmas seems to highlight the difficulties. Or maybe in an overly busy life, you just want space to pause- to reflect, recall, and regroup. Or maybe you are just grasping for any sign and reason to have hope this season. Wherever you find yourself, we meet in the name of a loving God,

All: Who knows our needs, hears our cries, and heals our wounds.

P: The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light.

We light the Christ candle as a sign that when all seems dark, there is still light.

Candle is lit

P: Come God-for-us: Who whispers in our ears that each of us are beloved children.

Come God-under-us: Who cradles us in arms that never grow weary; whose lap has room for all.

Come, God-with-us: Who braves our rejection and hurt, who holds us in acceptance and love.

Come, God-over-us: Who watches in the long silence of the night, that we might rest in peace.
Come, God-beside-us: Who steadies us when we falter, who lifts us up when we fall.
Come, God behind us: Who picks up all the faded dreams we drop along the way, and patchworks them into hope.

O come, O come, Immanuel:

C: And help us again rejoice.

Carol of Response: "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel"

ELW 257 (v. 1, 4, 7)/LBW 34

Assurance of God's Love and Acceptance

P: God, who is full of love and rich in mercy, loves us even when we feel lost, hopeless, missing, alone and hurt. You are made alive through Christ and by Christ's love and grace, you are not alone. May the Christ child be for you a sign of ever-present love and hope. In Jesus' name we pray.

C: Amen.

Carol of Response and Acclamation: "In the Bleak Midwinter"

ELW 294 (v. 1 & 2)

or "The Hills are Bare at Bethlehem"

LBW 61 (v. 1 & 2)

Hearing the Word of God for our time, our place

P: As we listen to the Word, we'll pause and light one of the Advent Wreath candles after each reading, and then share a short prayer before proceeding to the next reading.

First Reading: The Gospel of Luke 6:17-23

P: This familiar passage reveals that Jesus was well aware of people's sorrows, yearnings, and suffering, and offered a promise of something different.

He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them. Then he looked up at his disciples and said: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. "Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. "Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

The first candle may be lit

P: Lord Jesus,

C: like this candle, bring warmth and light to those who mourn, who hunger and thirst, and who weep.

Second Reading: Psalm 22:1-11

P: Even Jesus knew the feeling of being abandoned by God, the God whom he had believed in, and of being left alone in his darkness.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest. Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel. In you our ancestors trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them. To you they cried, and were saved; in you they trusted, and were not put to shame. But I am a worm, and not human; scorned by others, and despised by the people. All who see me mock at me; they make mouths at me, they shake their heads; "Commit your cause to the LORD; let him deliver — let him rescue the one in whom he delights!" Yet it was you who took me from the womb; you kept me safe on my mother's breast. On you I was cast from my birth, and since my mother bore me you have been my God. Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help.

The second candle may be lit

P: Spirit of God,

C: shine like this candle in the darkness, lighting the way for all who feel abandoned, hurt, forsaken, and forgotten.

Third Reading: The Gospel of Matthew 11:28-29

P: When burdens get piled on top of other burdens, or the rush of the seasons seems too great and gets in the way of our ability to be fully present, the load can seem too much. In his promise, Jesus offers us help to carry our burdens and responsibilities.

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

The third candle may be lit

P: Friend Jesus,

C: we don't ask you to shoulder our burdens for us, just help us carry a corner of them, and we can carry on.

Fourth Reading: Revelation 7:15-17

P: Our present world is not how God wants things to be. Those who weep now will not weep later. In the new heaven and new earth, there will be no more need for tears.

For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

The fourth candle may be lit

P: Lord God,

C: your vision seems a long way in the future. Bring your promise closer to us, we pray. Amen.

Meditation or Reflection

The Body of Christ Together

P: Now, to help support the work of the people of God, let us receive an offering- of our time, selves, and gifts.

Offering**Hymn During Offering**

“In the Bleak Midwinter” (Vs. 3)

ELW 294

OR “The Hills Are Bare at Bethlehem” (v. 3)

LBW 61

Gifts Prayer

P: God our giver and our gift,

C: You give yourself to us. In seeds and in harvest, in words and in water, in the prophet’s voice and the baby’s cry, You give yourself to us. We come to you with empty hands, empty hearts, empty lives. Open our hands to receive and to give. Fill us with the joy of your Son. We give ourselves to you. Amen.

Laying of Hands and Anointing

Those who wish to receive the laying on of hands (and anointing of oil) may come forward to the altar rail kneeling if you so choose. While the laying on of hands occurs, quiet music of the season may be played in the background. When being anointed the pastoral leader may say:

P: Beloved Child of God, through this holy anointing may God’s love and mercy uphold you by the grace and power of the Holy Spirit.

Prayer After Anointing

P: Let us pray. As you are anointed with this oil, may God bless you with the healing power of the Holy Spirit. May God forgive you your sins, release you from suffering, and restore to you wholeness and strength. May God deliver you from all evil, preserve you in all goodness, and bring you to everlasting life, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **C: Amen.**

Great Thanksgiving (*congregation may remain seated*)

P: The Lord be with you.

C: And also with you.

P: On this longest night of the year, a night of longing, hope, worries; of busyness and stress; calm our hearts. Gracious God, ground us in your presence. And welcome us as You do at your holy feast of welcome, reconciliation, healing, and grace.

Holy One, the beginning and the end, the giver of life: blessed are you for the birth of creation. Blessed are you in the darkness that is long on nights like this, and in the light of the day to come. Blessed are you for the memories we have, and the days ahead which you walk with us through. Blessed are you in the prophets’ hopes and dreams. Blessed are you for your Son Jesus, the Word made flesh.

In the night in which he was handed over, our Lord Jesus took bread, and gave thanks; broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying: Take and eat; this is my body, given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me. Again, after supper, he took the cup, gave thanks, and gave it for all to drink, saying: This cup is the new

covenant in my blood, shed for you and for all people for the forgiveness of sin. Do this for the remembrance of me.

Let us proclaim the mystery of faith.

C: Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

P: Holy God, we long for your Spirit. Come among us. Bless this meal. May your Word take flesh in us. Awaken your people. Fill us with your light. Bring the gift of peace on earth.

C: Come, Holy Spirit.

P: All praise and glory are yours, Holy One of Israel, Word of God incarnate, God with us.

C: Amen.

Lord's Prayer

P: Lord, remember us in your kingdom, and teach us to pray:

**C: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name,
thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.**

**Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us;**

and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.

Communion

P: These are the gifts of God for the people of God. Come, those of you who have great faith and those of you who wish you had more. Come, those of you who are filled with joy, and those of you who find joy to be hard to come by. Come, those of you who depend on this meal for your very life and those of you for whom it is a strange thing. Come, for Christ is truly present and the host. Everything is ready, all are welcome, and there is a place here for you at Jesus' table.

Distribution Instructions:

Distribution will be on the main floor of the sanctuary. Those desiring more time in prayer and reflection are welcome to kneel at the altar rail.

Suggested Hymns During Communion

- "Once in Royal David's City" ELW 269/WOV 643
- "Love Has Come" ELW 292

Announcements

Invitation for individual prayer and or conversation and fellowship is available after the service...

Benediction (based on Luke 1: 78-79)

P: A new day will dawn. Despite what we see and hear in the world around us, the sunrise is coming. When it comes, it will break through the darkness of our world—darkness caused by violence and death and hunger and despair. And all those who now sit huddled in the shadows will be able to rise and walk with confidence in the light. So go from here with courage and hope, to love and serve the Lord.

C: Amen.

Dismissal

P: Go now in peace, and know you are loved.

C: Thanks be to God.

Postlude

Tonight’s service was adapted from “The Longest Night Service or Blue Christmas” by Jim Taylor, with suggestions and contributions from David Shearman & Ecunet Listserve; as well as from *Moments of Grace: Hymns, Worship Services & Meditations for Caring and Healing Ministries* and “Longest Night Service” from St. Mary with St. Alban, Teddington.

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