

Worship Resources
*Advent-Christmas-
Epiphany 2010-11*

an unexpected HOUR

INTRODUCTION

In the Ancient Near East, water was at a premium. When the writers of the Bible reached for an image of abundance, it was often of a deep well or a river flowing freely. These word pictures contrasted vividly with the desert life people knew so well.

In our churches and among our friends in North America, our planning team has observed not so much a drought of water but of time. And unlike the water scarcity of ancient Palestine, our shortage is often one we choose and maintain through a variety of daily habits. Our use of time is connected in strange ways with our sense of worth, so we don't "have" time because we are driven to produce, afraid of falling short of our own and others' expectations. We feel pressure to be busy, and to help our children be busy. If, for whatever reason, we find ourselves with nothing to do and can't imagine a way to be "productive," we are likely to feel like we've "wasted" our time. We think of time as if it were a tradable good, speaking of it in the language of finance: "spend," "invest," "save." But where is all the drive and bustle taking us? What is the goal of our striving and producing? What is it we really need?

Perhaps we need a different awareness of time. This Advent, we invite you to do less. If that means Christmas shopping is streamlined and sparse, let it be so. If it means leaving the office early to go ice skating with the youth group, enjoy! If it means fewer cookies get baked and everything isn't perfect, thanks be to God. We are living in the midst of God's abundance: the time-drought is a human creation, and Christ frees us to drink from other wells. Both for ourselves and for our communities of faith, we are free to protect spaces of time to be alert. God is on the move. Will we wait and watch together as if we had nothing better to do?

In the worship resources that follow, each week's theme contrasts our time with the imaginative ways God is remaking the world. The season's texts lift up almost unbelievable visions of God's joyful restoration of relationships among all God has made: humans and other creatures and the earth under our feet. When we stop long enough to notice what's going on, God's

generosity and creativity surprise us, and, catching the vision, we can't help but respond.

As we gather for worship, we suggest beginning each service with silence, and leaving one or two quiet times within the service. A few snippets of stillness can offer us a sense of spaciousness and suggest a bounty of time, as well as give us opportunities to receive more deeply what has been said, to reflect on what we have heard. While silence may be an initial challenge, even very young children instinctively grow quiet and attentive when they're observing something new, and we can all learn, or re-learn, that early sense of hushed alertness. Especially if we release our need to eliminate the normal rustling and coughing of any gathering of people, silence is a Christian practice in which all worshipping communities can participate.

We can also extend that silence and unhurriedness into our day-to-day lives during the weeks leading up to Christmas. After doing so yourself, encourage members of your congregation to make space for some apparently unproductive, open, room-to-breathe time. Maybe we need fewer meetings. An earlier bedtime. A leisurely conversation with an old, or new, friend; with a child; with a spouse. Time to pray. Time to remember why we are people of faith to begin with; to remember the ways of the One who made us; to receive the Love who was born in poverty to unwed parents in the yawning back-country town of Bethlehem.

SUGGESTED ORDER OF WORSHIP

For these Advent worship times, we suggest sounding a bell (chime, gong, singing bowl) to help call the congregation's attention to God. The worship order includes sound, silence, the lighting of the Advent candles, visuals, music, scripture, story and testimony. We envision the tempo of worship as an unhurried making space for God, and the sound of the bell as a call to release our daily activities, allow the roar in our minds to quiet, and sink into a place where we can be open to God's presence. Later, the bell marks transitions

to silent reflection between scripture readings and silent response to the sermon and testimony.

If silence is new to your congregation, consider beginning with thirty seconds and gradually increasing to sixty. Other congregations may want to use 3-5 minutes of silence. If quiet music is played during some silences, use instrumental music rather than instrumental versions of familiar hymns so that people aren't distracted by remembered words. The song leader or worship leader can prepare the congregation for the silence by saying something like this: "After we sing this last song, you will hear a bell calling us to turn our attention to God and enter a time of silent listening for God." Choose songs that strengthen the transition into listening, silence, and reflection.

A shorter sermon will make space for testimony from the congregation. This way, the congregation can hear the scripture, a message drawing the scripture into their lives, and a specific example from the congregation of how God has indeed acted. Sharing God's faithfulness and God's activity in our lives fosters our spiritual growth. Contact people well in advance of the Advent season to invite them to give witness to God's action in their lives. Testimony can be directly related to the week's scriptures, can focus more broadly on the question of time (and God's timing), or can simply give people an opportunity to tell a story from their own lives that bears witness to God's transforming action right here and now.

Following is the overall format for each worship service during the Advent-Epiphany season. Note that the first scripture can be read either during the *Praising* or *Hearing the Word* sections of the service.

Gathering

Congregational singing
Bell is rung
Silence
Lighting the Advent candles
Gathering Words
Opening Prayer

Praising

Congregational singing
Option 1: First Scripture
Offering

Hearing the Word

Children's Time
Option 2: First Scripture
Bell is rung

Silence
Second scripture
Homily
Song of response
Testimony

Responding

Bell is rung
Silence
Confession
Words of Assurance
Congregational sharing (Weave announcements into this time to help streamline the feel of the morning and so that our activities, as well as our concerns, might be offered up in prayer)
Congregational prayer

Sending

Benediction
Congregational song

VISUALS

The visual suggestions for worship relate directly to the passing of time and how we use that time to develop our relationship with God. Keep visuals simple so you don't undo with over stimulating sights the spaciousness opened up by the silence. Visuals at their most effective will lead us beyond themselves and into gazing on God.

Scale visuals to fit the size and shape of your worship space and the number of worshippers in your congregation. Remember to step back as you prepare—most of the congregation will see the visuals from much farther away than the arm's length of the person creating the display or art piece.

Several possibilities follow: use one or more depending on what will work best for your own congregation.

- a large paper mural of an hour glass at the front of the sanctuary could be filled with written prayers throughout the season of Advent. Prayers could be written on sticky notes or directly on the mural. Consider having someone paint the mural during worship on the first Sunday—one of the blocks of silence could include watching this visual piece develop right before our eyes.

Permission to photocopy

Subscribers to *Leader* are welcome to photocopy worship materials in this section.

- a large Advent calendar could include different time signifiers behind each door (one for every Sunday of Advent through Epiphany)—an arc of the sun in the sky from sunrise to sunset, a sundial, an hour glass, a pocket watch, a wrist-watch, an old-fashioned grandfather clock are all possibilities.
- a series of pulpit banners featuring a sundial showing the time changing from week to week through Advent and into Epiphany.
- a traditional Advent wreath on a round table in the center of the sanctuary. Cover the table with a purple tablecloth. Then create gold lamé “pie slices” (one for each week during Advent through Epiphany) so that you can add a slice each week as each candle is lit. In this way, the tabletop will evoke a sundial with the light gradually expanding throughout the season. You could also embody the expanding light by having people come toward the center to light the Advent candles from different parts of the sanctuary, thus extending the symbolic reach of the sundial across the entire congregation. For the first Sunday after Christmas and for Epiphany, a table draped in white and gold and covered in white candles is a powerful visual of the light of Christ coming into the world.

MUSIC AND THEME SONG

Given the emphasis on silence as a way of readying ourselves for the unexpected hour in these worship services, we suggest the quietly reflective yet hopeful STS 49, “I will come to you in the silence” as a theme song for this season. If your congregation does not have access to *Sing the Story*, HWB 140 “Open, Lord, my inward ear” is another good choice. Other song suggestions are listed in the weekly resources.

CHILDREN’S TIMES

The person leading children’s time each Sunday should be someone who knows the children well, and who can be natural and relaxed with them. Each conversation begins with a few items brought quietly and slowly from a beautiful box, and time for the children to look at and wonder together about them. This holy moment for the children invites all present to see through their eyes. To help the congregation participate well, you might open by saying to the children, “This is your special time. It is also the time when the rest of us listen and wonder and are quiet with you.”

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

While we’re suggesting a pared-down and spacious Advent-Epiphany season, we’re also including several possibilities to deepen awareness of and connection with God during this season. These are not intended as more “shoulds” to add to already overflowing lives, but as practices and activities that can help us release our time poverty and receive the gifts of this unexpected hour. Encourage members of your congregation to take on these “extras” only if they come as good news. It may be more important in the long run to de-clutter schedules and do much, much less. A season of “loafing” or “doing nothing” is likely the best preparation for future decisions about time-use that flow more fully with the priorities of the reign of God.

Included at www.leaderonline.org are some at-home suggestions for families and an Advent retreat by Marlene Kropf. For two more Advent retreats, see Rose Mary Stutzman, ed. *Soul Care: How to Plan and Guide Inspirational Retreats* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 2003, pp. 271-77).

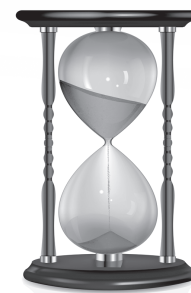
Your congregation may also want to consider offering a longest night service. Traditionally held on Dec. 21, this service make space in the Christmas season for those living in the darkness of grief, loss, or pain. A longest night service by Tina Stoltzfus Schlabach is included at www.leaderonline.org. A book recently edited by Diane Zaerr Brenneman, *Words for Worship 2* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 2009), also includes two services that could serve as templates for a longest night service planned by your own congregation.



Rachel Miller Jacobs

Worship planners (from left to right): Sherry Sprouls, David Moser, Samantha Lioi, Heidi Siemens-Rhodes, Karla Minter. Not pictured: Larry Rohrer.

An unexpected hour



November 28, 2010 – Advent 1: Wake from sleep!

Text: Isaiah 2:1-5; Psalm 122; Romans 13:11-14; Matthew 24:36-44

Focus statement:

In our time, we see the nations divided, each seeking its own interest. God calls us beyond our national boundaries into being *one* people, awakened from sleep and alert for signs of God's coming reign.

Visuals: Old-fashioned hearing aid, bell, shofar, cell phone, and other items that get our attention

Song suggestions:

HWB 318 <i>Joy to the world</i>	STS 5	<i>Open my ears, open my eyes</i>
HWB 188 <i>Sleepers, wake</i>	STS 10	<i>Come! Walk in the light</i>
HWB 404 <i>O Jesus Christ, may grateful hymns</i>	STJ 5	<i>Come and be light for our eyes</i>
HWB 295 <i>Christ is coming! Let creation</i>	STJ 78	<i>Sizohamba naye</i>
HWB 316 <i>In this world abound scrolls</i>	STJ 95	<i>I want to walk as a child of the light</i>

GATHERING

Congregational singing

Final gathering song:

STS 49 *I will come to you in the silence, vv. 1, 2*

OR

HWB 140 *Open, Lord, my inward ear, vv. 1, 2*

Bell and silence

Lighting the Advent candles

Gathering:

Leader: Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,

People: **that God may teach us
and we may walk in God's paths.**

Leader: This is the moment to wake from sleep,

People: **for salvation is nearer to us now
than when we first believed.**

Leader: The night is far gone, the day is near.

People: **Be ready;
Jesus is coming at an unexpected hour.**

Opening prayer

PRAISING

Congregational singing

OPTION 1: First scripture

Offering

HEARING THE WORD

Children's time:

Materials: a large box with a lift-off lid (for each Sunday); skin tone cut-outs of peoples of many races (simple people shapes, or pictures from magazines) with the name of a country written on the back of each, enough for each child (make extra!)

Say: Have you ever been surprised? I was once very surprised. [Tell a story of being surprised]. This is the season of Advent, the time each year when we wait to celebrate Jesus' birth on Christmas Day. Each Sunday you will hear bells calling us to prayer, and you will see another candle lit in the wreath to remind us that we are getting closer to Christmas. And each Sunday we will look in this box and find some things to help us imagine ways God is surprising.

I wonder what is in this box. [Take out several people from the box, setting them far away from each other.] Do you see all these people? Which ones do you think go together? [Let children group them however they want to]. How can you tell if people are in the same family? [Listen for answers]. Brothers and sisters usually look like each other, or talk like each other, or like some of the same things—like [give an example from the congregation]. But these people look different from one another. And God says—wake up! Pay attention: you are all my family! You are all brothers and sisters. You belong together, no matter how different you are.

Before you go, let's bow our heads and pray. God, thank you for surprising us with your love. Thank you for all our brothers and sisters all over the world. In Jesus' name, Amen.

You may take one of these people back to your seat, and read, or ask someone to tell you, the name of the country written on the back. Maybe you can learn more about the people of this country this next week.

OPTION 2: First scripture

Bell and silence

Second scripture

Sermon helps:

*"It is good therefore that we be prepared. Our ignorance of the day of Christ's return should provoke us to be careful as we eagerly await his coming."
—Hilary of Poitiers (AD 315- 368)*

The word *wait* is of German origin and means one who stays awake and watches. In English we usually think of *wait* as a verb, but it can also be a noun: a *wait* is a night *watchman*. In England a *wait* also came to mean a band of musicians who played at public functions to entertain the crowd and hold their attention.

By the Fourth Century it was obvious that Christ's return, as anticipated by the early Church, was not coming as soon as expected. With the delay came renewed vigor on the part of church writers for diligent wakeful waiting. As this waiting stretched out over the centuries, prophetic reminders of Christ's imminent return rallied the faithful to sell their possessions, or gather on hill tops, and even, in one case, overthrow a city state (Munster, Germany, during the radical reformation).

In this first Sunday of Advent we return once again to a message that calls for a heightened sense of anticipation that something miraculous is about to happen—God is about break into our midst. Christ's promised return will be realized. And so against the weight of history's long wait we might ponder the following questions in preparation for this Sunday. In what form and how do we expect Christ's return? Is Christ's return a singular event or a moment repeated countless times over, or in some paradoxical way both a singular event and repeated innumerable times in history? How has lethargy overtaken our waiting? How has wakeful attentiveness opened up new vistas of God's presence?

*How might we, as the church, be a **wait**, a group of people who sustain in the world a readiness for the Kingdom of God?*

Song of response:

HWB 508 *Holy Spirit, Truth divine*

Testimony

RESPONDING

Bell and silence

Confessing:

Leader: God, we are suspicious of your surprises.

**People: If you gather all people in your name,
we'll have to worship with people we love to hate.**

Leader: You say, "Keep watch," but we are distracted.

**People: We have been sleepless, though not alert;
awake, but not watching.**

Leader: Stir up your Spirit among us.

People: Wipe the sleep from our eyes.

Words of assurance

Congregational sharing and announcements

Congregational prayer

SENDING

Go with eyes open for God, who welcomes stranger and alien.

Go in the wakefulness of Christ, breathing the wind of his Spirit. Amen.

Sending song:

STS 16 *Peace before us*

OR

HWB 181 *My soul proclaims with wonder, v. 4 only.* (While this is rarely used as a sending song, it would allow people to leave worship with the wonder of God's unexpected blessing on their lips)

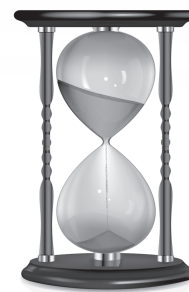
An unexpected hour

December 5, 2010 – Advent 2: Repent and reconnect!

Text: Isaiah 11:1-10; Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12

Focus statement:

In our time, animals prey on one another, people oppress one another, and nature is damaged by the ax. God calls us to repent and live into a surprising new order: a menagerie of friendly beasts, people who live in harmony with one another, and natural regrowth from deep roots.



Song suggestions:

HWB 172 *O come, O come, Immanuel*
HWB 174 *Bless'd be the God of Israel*
HWB 183 *On Jordan's banks the Baptist's cry*
HWB 408 *O day of peace*
HWB 142 *Brothers and sisters of mine*

STS 8 *Wild and lone the prophet's voice*
STS 14 *Prepare the way of the Lord*
STS 112 *My Lord, he is a-comin' soon*
STJ 23 *Slowly turning, ever turning*
STJ 87 *Put peace into each other's hands*

GATHERING

Congregational singing

Final gathering song:

STS 49 *I will come to you in the silence, vv. 1, 4*
OR
HWB 140 *Open, Lord, my inward ear, vv. 1, 4*

Bell and silence

Lighting the Advent candles

Gathering:

Leader: Prepare the way of the Lord! Straighten the crooked paths!
People: **A shoot shall come out from Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.**
Leader: The Spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,
the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.
People: **Nations will rejoice, for God's kin-dom has come near.**

Opening prayer

PRAISING

Congregational singing

OPTION 1: First scripture

Offering

HEARING THE WORD

Children's time:

Materials: a large box with a lift-off lid (for each Sunday); a stuffed wolf and lamb, a picture of a tree and a picture of an ax (or toy models if possible), and two people figures.

Say: I wonder what is in this box. [Take out the 6 items, in no particular order.] I wonder what these things have to do with each other. [Listen to the children's wonderings, and respond with non-judging comments.] Some things go together, and some things don't. Do a wolf and a lamb go together? I don't think so. If a wolf is hungry, it will eat a lamb. Do a tree and ax go together? Well, maybe, but if a person uses the ax to cut down the tree, that's the end of it. Do two people go together? Hmm... sometimes we get along, but sometimes we fight! [Pause. Then put the things next to each other as you mention them.] God says, "I am putting things back together, in a better way! The wolf and the lamb will be able to play together, and

the lamb does not need to be afraid. The ax will only be used to trim the tree, cutting off broken or damaged branches so that it can be healthy and live longer. And even if the tree is chopped down, a new tree will grow out of the stump! And those fighting people? I will be with them, and help them get along.” God says, “My love brings surprising peace between animals, people, and even in nature.”

Before you go, let’s bow our heads and pray. God, thank you for surprising us with your love. Thank you for showing us how to stop fighting and get along. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

OPTION 2: First scripture

Bell and silence

Second scripture

Sermon helps:

“So do you want the kingdom of heaven to also be near you? Prepare these ways in your heart, in your senses and in your soul. Pave within you the way of chastity, the way of faith, the way of holiness. Build roads of justice. Remove every scandal of offense from your heart.”
—Chromatius of Aquileia (died 406 or 407)

The path of repentance is an inner journey that brings forth outward change, and at the same time repentance is change in our actions that can nurture inward change. Like the chicken and egg conundrum it can be difficult at times to figure out which came first—how *did* that turning toward God really come about? But then again, maybe the sequence doesn’t really matter. Either way will do.

In a world where the weight of our brokenness carries its own momentum, a change of purpose that reconnects us with God, people, and the creation is literally good news, and nothing short of a miracle—a moment when the kingdom of heaven draws near.

What practical changes are we being called to make in our personal and corporate lives that will testify to our preparedness for the Christ child’s arrival among us this Christmas? Where are we being challenged to change our purpose?

Song of response:

HWB 176 *Comfort, comfort, O my people*

Testimony

RESPONDING

Bell and silence

Confessing (unison):

Holy One, the flurry of motion and money
consumes our vision and clogs our ears.
Though we lack your spirit of wisdom and understanding,
of counsel and might,
we long to know and love you.
Refresh us and fill us with your Spirit
as the waters fill the sea. Amen.

Words of assurance

Congregational sharing and announcements

Congregational prayer

SENDING

May the God of steadfastness and encouragement
grant you to live in harmony with one another,
so you may with one voice glorify the God of our Lord Jesus Christ.
May the God of hope
fill you with all joy and peace in believing,
so you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Sending song:

STS 16 *Peace before us*

OR

HWB 181 *My soul proclaims with wonder, v. 3 only.*

An unexpected hour

December 12, 2010 – Advent 3: Be patient as God works!

Text: Psalm 146:5-10 or Luke 1:47-55; Isaiah 35:1-10; James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11

Focus statement:

In our time, we suffer, and witness the suffering of others. God calls us to envision the end of suffering, to be patient observers of God's healing action, and at the same time active partners with God in the coming of the good news of restoration.

Song suggestions:

HWB 296 *Here from all nations*

HWB 184 *Hark! The glad sound*

HWB 400 *Santo, santo, santo*

HWB 166 *I'll praise my maker*

HWB 421 *Blest be the tie that binds (see v. 5)*

STS 1 *Praise the One who breaks the darkness*

STS 115 *Beauty for brokenness*

STS 13 *Sing we a song of high revolt*

STJ 13 *My soul is filled with joy*

STJ 69 *Cuando el pobre*



GATHERING

Congregational singing

Final gathering song:

STS 49 *I will come to you in the silence, vv. 1, 3*

OR

HWB 140 *Open, Lord, my inward ear, vv. 1, 3*

Bell and silence

Lighting the Advent candles

Gathering:

Leader: As the farmer waits for the precious crop,
patient until the earth receives the early and the late rains,

**People: we strengthen our hearts in hope,
for the Lord's coming is near.**

Leader: Go and tell what you have seen and heard:

**People: doubters are being reassured,
addicts are staying clean,
the poor are hearing good news!**

Leader: Blest are those who take no offense
at these signs of new life.

Opening prayer

PRAISING

Congregational singing

OPTION 1: First scripture

Offering

HEARING THE WORD

Children's time:

Materials: a large box with a lift-off lid (for each Sunday); a grain of wheat; a stalk of wheat, and a loaf of bread (provide a gluten-free alternative if necessary)

Say: I wonder what is in this box. [Take out the grain, the stalk, and the bread.] I wonder what all these things have in common. [Let the children wonder, and respond with non-judging comments.] I am hungry. So hungry. I want bread, but all I have is these grains of wheat. Do you think I should eat them right now? If I plant them, and water them, look, with patience God will cause it to grow into a wheat stalk, which has many seeds in it. Then I would have more than I started with. But I am so hungry now. Should I eat them now? Or should I wait, grow the wheat seeds, grind my harvest into flour? If I have flour I can make bread, something delicious, and I'll even have enough to share with all of you!

Sometimes we want something now, but if we are patient, with God's help there is a better thing waiting for us. Only God can make the seed grow. It takes time. Can we help God's work? Sure—we can water the plant, and pull weeds while we wait, but it's God who's doing the work. When do you have to be patient, and how can we help when we're waiting? Maybe if we were waiting for supper or a snack, we could help get it ready. Or, if something happens that make us sad, like when people are sick, or get hurt, while we wait for them to become better we can pray for God to be with them, and we can send them notes to let them know we love them. God says, "Sometimes you just have to wait while I work, but you can always find a way to help in my work, too."

Before you go, let's bow our heads and pray. God, thank you for surprising us with your love. Sometimes it is hard for us to be patient. Help us to know that even when we are waiting, you are always at work. In Jesus' name, Amen.

You may take a chunk of this bread as you go back to your seats. Thank you for waiting so patiently!

OPTION 2: First scripture

Bell and silence

Second scripture

Sermon helps:

“O my dear friend, I should never have thought that parting should come so hard to me as it does. True the imprisonment seemed hard to me; but that was because they were so tyrannical; but now the parting is the hardest of all.”

—Maeyken Wens (1573, writing to her husband from prison upon receiving a death sentence for her Anabaptist faith)

The compelling frailty of Maeyken Wens’ courage, and John the Baptist’s prison musings about whether Jesus is the one, reminds us that the heroes of the faith are human like us and sometime have feet of clay.

Jesus’ reply to John’s disciples invites them to embrace the Messianic moment. He points to the signs of the times, listing spectacular healing and good news being brought to the poor. But conspicuous in its absence is any mention of a forthcoming release of captives, something John certainly had a personal stake in. By implication Jesus invites John, his disciples and us to be patient as we watch and wait for the Messianic age to unfold. What lessons await us as we watch and wait? And how might our witness add to the hope of a kingdom yet to come where love and peace, justice and mercy are companions in bringing hope, healing, and life equally to all?

Maeyken Wens, like John the Baptist, learned something of patience in affliction. The power of her witness, and of the witness of many martyrs, was magnified by the mingling of her humanity, frailty, and integrity in faith. Maeyken would later write to her children just before her execution, *“Adieu, my dear children, all of you ... The Lord takes away all fear; I did not know what to do for joy, when I was sentenced.”* Her letters and Jesus’ words to John the Baptist outline a simple formula for us: patience rests on hope, hope infuses courage, and courage deepens faith that the promises of God will one day be fulfilled.

How are the struggles before us increasing our patience, our willingness to wait in hope for the promises of God that will one day be fulfilled?

Song of response:

HWB 350 *Lord, teach us how to pray aright*

Testimony

RESPONDING

Bell and silence

Confessing:

Leader: Mighty God, patience is not our strongest suit.

People: **Everything around us moves at breakneck speed, and we expect you also to work at our pace.**

Leader: Forgive us.

People: **By your Spirit, teach us the grace of your long and steady quest for justice. Amen.**

Words of assurance

Congregational sharing and announcements

Congregational prayer

SENDING

Do not be afraid! God is here.
God's highway makes a path in the wilderness:
not even fools will go astray.
God lifts you up, you who are bowed low;
God is coming to deliver you.

Sending song:

STS 16 *Peace before us*
OR

HWB 181 *My soul proclaims with wonder, v. 2 only.*

An unexpected hour

December 19, 2010 – Advent 4: See the sign!

Text: Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; Isaiah 7:10-16; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25

Focus statement:

In our time, God is seen as a powerful tyrant or an irrelevant myth. God calls us to celebrate the center point of human history, when God came to live with us as a small one in need of parents' love, provision and protection: a sign of unexpected power in weakness.



Song suggestions:

HWB 173 *Savior of the nations, come*
HWB 178 *Come, thou long-expected Jesus*
HWB 191 *O little town of Bethlehem*
HWB 195 *It came upon a midnight clear*
HWB 208 *Love came down at Christmas*

STS 6 *Save us, O Lord*
STS 7 *Come, come Emmanuel*
STS 15 *Hope is a candle*
STS 20 *Hacia Belén se en caminan*
STS 110 *Alleluia! Gracious Jesus!*

GATHERING

Congregational singing

Final gathering song:

STS 49 *I will come to you in the silence, vv. 1, 2*
OR

HWB 140 *Open, Lord, my inward ear, vv. 1, 5*

Bell and silence

Lighting the Advent candles

Gathering:

Leader: Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel! Show us your face!

People: **Stir up your might, O God: shine forth!
Let your face shine, that we may be delivered.**

Leader: Ask a sign of the Lord your God;
let it be deep as the grave or high as the heavens.

People: **The Lord gives us a sign.
Look, the young woman bears a child,
and calls him Emmanuel, God with us.**

Leader: He is declared to be the Son of God with power
according to the spirit of holiness,

People: **He is our Lord, through whom we have received grace.
He has sent us among all outsiders.**

Opening prayer

PRAISING

Congregational singing

OPTION 1: First scripture

Offering

HEARING THE WORD

Children's time:

Materials: a large box with a lift-off lid (for each Sunday); a picture or model of a castle, crown, and rock; an international or racial/ethnic baby doll

Say: I wonder what is in this box. [Lift the lid and take out all the items except for the baby.] I wonder what all these things have in common. [Let the children wonder, and respond with non-judging comments.] I wonder what God is like. Sometimes we say that God is like a fortress, or castle, to keep us safe. Sometimes we say that God is like a rock, strong and steady. Sometimes we say that God is like a King or Queen, in charge of everything. [Take the baby out of the box.] And in Advent and Christmas we remember that God is like a baby, too. God, who made the whole world, and is strong and powerful, came to earth as a little baby. That's surprising. That's like if you have a toy that your friends really wants, a cool, new toy that you just got, and you just give it away. That's like if you have a lot of friends, and you find someone who is alone, and go over to be their friend. God gave up power and safety and strength and came to be just like one of us, beginning as a little baby. But you know what else? God also made sure that that baby, Jesus, had a family to take care of him. And we, too, can help take care of those who need our help, just like Mary and Joseph took care of Jesus and moms and dads take care of us.

Before you go, let's bow our heads and pray. God, thank you for surprising us with your love. Thank you for coming to us as a baby. We want to take care of people, just like your family took good care of you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

OPTION 2: First scripture

Bell and silence

Second scripture

Sermon helps:

“A sign is something that differs from the normal way things happen, that is outside the natural manner. A sign is so unusual and unexpected that someone who sees it or hears of it sees that it is out of the ordinary. It is called a ‘sign’ because it is significant.”

*—John Chrysostom (347-40, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. Vol X
Isaiah 1–39, p. 64)*

Christopher Hitchens, in writing his critique of religion and defense of atheism, concludes that “Religion has run out of justifications. Thanks to the telescope and the microscope, it no longer offers an explanation of anything important” (*God Is Not Great: How religion poisons everything*, 2007, p. 282). Hitchens argues that the only *signs* we need to look for are those found in the material world and explicable through reason.

Unfortunately, this brand of “debate” between science and religion, fact and revelation, faith and reason portrays the discourse as an either/or dichotomy, oversimplifying complex issues and leaving us with answers that do not satisfy. Yet the truth is that science and faith have something significant in common: their shared passion for mystery. Both religion and science seek to open up Mystery, understand it, know it, and in some form integrate it into the meaning of our lives. And both science and religion must at some point make a leap of the imagination to connect Mystery either to reason or to faith.

Imagination in the hands of science opens up new avenues of knowledge. $E=mc^2$ is more than a beautiful equation; it was an imaginative leap on Einstein’s part. Imagination in the hands of religion opens up new avenues of hope. “Immanuel, God with us” is more than a neatly packaged theological insight; it is an imaginative leap on the part of humanity and God both. Whenever imagination opens up new and beautiful vistas of what it means to be human, be it through science or religion, no justification is required; and that is where Christopher Hitchens’ argument falls short.

From a religious perspective, imagination is a sacred thing—it opens us up to see the sign of God’s advent in our midst. Where is your imagination being stretched this Advent to see the sign?

Song of response:

HWB 215 *What child is this*

Testimony

RESPONDING

Bell and silence

Confessing (unison):

Vulnerable God, we expect you to be mighty
according to the spirit of our age.
Prick our ears again with an infant’s cry,
tiny, yet powerful in its demand for our response.
Put us at the mercy of this Child.
Open our eyes to see this weak and powerful sign. Amen.

Words of assurance

Congregational sharing and announcements

Congregational prayer

SENDING

You are God's beloved, called to belong to Christ.
Grace to you and peace!

Sending song:

STS 16 *Peace before us*

OR

HWB 181 *My soul proclaims with wonder, v. 1 only.*

An unexpected hour

December 26, 2010 – First Sunday after Christmas: Weep and rejoice!

Text: Isaiah 63:7-9; Psalm 148; Hebrews 2:10-18; Matthew 2:13-23

Focus statement:

In our time, sorrow and longing are avoided or denied, especially in the holiday season. God calls us to name our joy and our pain, and frees us to praise God while lamenting the suffering of God's people.

Song suggestions:

The Sunday after Christmas is often met with requests for Christmas carols. Yet the text moves quickly from birth to flight and, of course, pain and suffering. Unbridled enthusiasm is met with muted joy. The following songs reflect these themes.

HWB 192 *On this day earth shall ring*

HWB 194 *Away in a manger*

HWB 201 *Hark! The herald angels sing*

HWB 205 *From heaven above to earth I come*

HWB 212 *O come, all ye faithful*

STS 22 *There were angels hov'ring round*

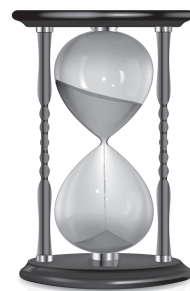
STS 25 *A stable lamp is lighted*

STS 27 *Sing a different song*

STS 28 *Holy Child within the manger*

STJ 31 *He came down*

Welcome to Our World, by Chris Rice, 1995 Clumsy Fly Music, ARR



GATHERING

Congregational singing

Final gathering song:

STS 49 *I will come to you in the silence, vv. 1 only*

OR

HWB 204 *Gloria*

Bell and silence

Lighting the Christ candle

Gathering:

- Leader: I will recount the gracious deeds of the Lord,
People: because of the abundance of God's steadfast love.
- Leader: God said, "Out of Egypt I called my son,"
in joy and in pain, God is bringing us to freedom.
- People: The Christ child is born,
and still Rachel weeps for her children,
refusing to be comforted.**
- Leader: Jesus shares our skin:
he lives with the lonely and bereaved.
- All: It is no messenger or angel,
but God's own presence that saves us.**

Opening prayer

PRAISING

Congregational singing

OPTION 1: First scripture

Offering

HEARING THE WORD

Children's time:

Materials: a large box with a lift-off lid (for each Sunday); a handkerchief; a strip of cloth for each child

Say: I wonder what is in this box. [Lift the lid and take out the handkerchief.] I wonder what this is, and what it's for. [Let the children wonder, and respond with non-judging comments.] If I were really sad, I might cry, and I could wipe my tears with this handkerchief. And if I were really happy, I could jump around and wave this handkerchief in the air to show my joy! There are times in our lives when we are very sad, and times when we are very happy. And God is there in both of those times. Let's make a circle with the handkerchief. Maybe this is a sad place [point to the bottom] and this is a happy place [point to the top], and we go around and around, sometimes happy, sometimes sad, sometimes in-between. But God is all around the circle, and fills the circle, and surrounds the circle. God wants to know how we really feel: when we feel happy, when we feel sad, when we feel mad, when we feel terrible—or whatever other feeling we have. God knows us and loves us and holds us gently, no matter what. After we pray, you may take a strip of cloth with you to remember the circle of God's love, with us always.

Before you go, let's bow our heads and pray. God, thank you for surprising us with your love. Thank you for being with us and loving us no matter how we feel. In Jesus' name, Amen.

OPTION 2: First scripture

Bell and silence

Second scripture

Sermon helps:

“Why did Christ do this? Christ is the judge of thoughts and the examiner of minds. Why did he desert those whom he knew would be killed for his sake? He was born a king, the king of heaven—why did he neglect the standard bearers of his own innocence? ... Why did he thus abandon those who were cut down as plunder from the same cradle as himself?”
—Peter Chrysologus (AD 406-450, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*.
Vol. Ia. Matthew 1-13, InterVarsity Press, 2001, p. 34)

The question “why” in the face of suffering is perhaps as old as humanity itself. The early church writers, like us, grappled with the question “why” in the face of this uncomfortable story of the murder of the innocents by Herod’s army in the wake of the magi’s departure.

The peaceful serenity of a Christmas promise of “good will” toward all is absent in Matthew’s telling of the story. Death follows immediately on the heels of birth, despair seeks to swallow up hope; tears of joy are indistinguishable from tears of grief.

We are prone to forget that the Christmas story is not a pleasant children’s story. The death of the innocents reminds us that we must hold very disparate realities together simultaneously: life and death, hope and despair, joy and sorrow, courage and terror, beauty and horror.

The early Church writers often answered the “why” for the merciless and senseless suffering inflicted on the children, mothers, and families of Bethlehem and surrounding countryside with the assuring word that these innocents were taken up by God as the first martyrs of Christ. But not every death is meaningful, and not every death is made so by bestowing an honored martyr status upon the deceased. Sometimes suffering simply rises from inexplicable chaos, and sometimes the death of innocents is senseless and demands nothing more and nothing less than weeping. Sometimes weeping must give way to justifiable outrage at an injustice done.

Is the wailing from Bethlehem only a cry of grief or is it also a wailing cry for justice? If the wailing from Bethlehem is a cry for justice, then may that cry never be silenced; if it is the cry of grief may it be comforted. Two thousand years ago, both the cry of sorrow and the cry for justice were yet to be soothed by the promised justice and healing sealed in the life yet to be lived by the Christ child. Our reality is not much different: we wait for comfort and justice in the time between the first coming of Christ and the complete fulfillment of what God has promised.

What are the hard irreconcilable truths, the disparate realities in your life, your congregation, the church, your community, our world that beg to be named this day, wept over, and rejoiced over as seeds of promise for God’s future action?

Song of response:

HWB 320 *Oh, holy city seen of John*

Testimony

RESPONDING

Bell and silence

Confessing (unison):

God of lavish gifts and freeing love,
it is hard to hold suffering and celebration together.
We are grateful for Jesus’ birth,
and we long to see wrong made right.
Free us from the need for tidy packages of faith,
and loosen our grip on the fears and griefs that bind us.
Strengthen our arms to hold this new child
and to offer him a home among us. Amen.

Words of assurance

Congregational sharing and announcements

Congregational prayer

SENDING

Go, covered with God's favor,
sheltered by God's mercy,
awash in the abundance of God's steadfast love.

Sending song:

STS 16 *Peace before us*

OR

HWB 435 *May the Lord, mighty God*

An unexpected hour

January 2, 2011 – Epiphany: Be the sign!

Text: Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14; Isaiah 60:1-6; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

Focus statement:

In our time, the church is scattered and shattered, divided by differing belief and practice. God calls us to display divine wisdom in its rich variety and reveal the mystery of Christ, which draws all people to God.

Song suggestions:

HWB 199 *The first Noel, the angel did say*

HWB 202 *The virgin Mary had a baby boy*

HWB 214 *Morning Star, O cheering sight*

HWB 638 *God is working his purpose out*

HWB 221 *Hail the bless'd morn*

STS 29 *Brightest and best*

STS 30 *Arise, your light is come!*

STS 31 *Jesus, be the center*

STS 32 *Oh, beautiful star of Bethlehem*

STJ 27 *God of the Bible*



GATHERING

Congregational singing

Final gathering song:

STS 49 *I will come to you in the silence, vv. 1 only*

OR

HWB 56 *Awake, arise, O sing a new song*

Bell and silence

Lighting the Christ candle

Gathering:

Leader: Arise, shine! For your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.

People: **Grace was given to us
to bring the news of the boundless riches of Christ,**

Leader: and to make everyone see the mystery
hidden for ages in God who created all things,

People: **so that, through the church,
the wisdom of God in its rich variety
might now be made known to rulers and authorities
in the heavens and in the earth.**

Opening prayer

PRAISING

Congregational singing

OPTION 1: First scripture

Offering

HEARING THE WORD

Children's time:

Materials: a large box with a lift-off lid (for each Sunday); pictures of several people in the congregation who are willing to come forward and briefly tell the children one way that they live out God's surprising love (for example, "Many nurses are women, but I always wanted to help heal people, and so I am a male nurse." "I ride my bike to work even in the winter, because I want to care for the earth, and cars are not very good for the earth," or "In my spare time I make quilts, which I give away to make money for people who need help"). If possible, encourage each person to bring a visual of their surprising love.

Say: I wonder what is in this box. [Lift the lid and take out the pictures.] I wonder what all these things have in common. [Let the children wonder, and respond with non-judging comments.] Do you know these people? They are part of our church, and they live out God's love in surprising ways. I've asked them to come tell us about that. [Listen to the people's sentences.] Thank you! Today we remember that the magi, people who watched the stars and had lots of riches, were some of Jesus' first visitors. These big important people traveled a long, long way to worship a baby king. I wonder what they thought when they met Jesus. Like the magi, and like [names of people in your church who just spoke to children] and others in our church, we can do surprising things to show God's love. Can you think of any fun ideas? I wonder what wonderful ways you are already showing God's surprising love, or what things you've imagined you could do.

Before you go, let's bow our heads and pray. God, thank you for surprising us with your love. Give us all kinds of good ideas of how we can live out your surprising love. In Jesus' name, Amen.

OPTION 2: First scripture

Bell and silence

Second scripture

Sermon helps:

*"To discover how to be truthful now
Is the reason I follow this star ...*

*To discover how to be living now
Is the reason I follow this star ...*

*To discover how to be loving now
Is the reason I follow this star."*

—*W. H. Auden (1907-1973; For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio)*

The three Wise Men in Auden's lengthy poetic rendition of the Christmas story each have their particular reason for following the star, and in that reason lies a rule of life, a way of being in the world. For the wise man seeking truth there is the implicit call to speak truth. For the wise man seeking to live now there is the implicit call to embrace death. For the wise man seeking to discover love there is the implicit call to serve humanity. Like them, perhaps the sign we are called to be in the world will arise from what motivates our own quest for the star.

In today's epistle reading, Paul alludes to his own epiphany: the invitation to grace and reconciliation revealed to him on the road to Damascus. In taking up his commission from Jesus, the former Saul became a sign of "the mystery that was not [previously] made known to humankind"—that the Gentiles have become fellow heirs and sharers in the promise of Christ. Paul went on to spend his life proclaiming and living reconciliation between Jew and Gentile.

What draws us toward the Star, the Christ child? As you think about what motivates your own particular journey, what kind of sign might God be calling you to be in the world?

Song of response:

HWB 493 *I heard the voice of Jesus say*

Testimony

RESPONDING

Bell and silence

Praying (unison):

Christ, you illumine us,
and in your light we see light.
Make us radiant, a people giving and receiving light
among our neighbors, whether friend or adversary.
Make your people as nourishing as showers that water the earth.
Make us one, that righteousness may flourish,
and that well-being may abound. Amen.

Congregational sharing and announcements

Congregational prayer

SENDING

May the wisdom of God in its rich variety be shown,
through you, to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places!
Go in Christ's light and the wholeness of his Spirit. Amen.

Sending song:

STS 16 *Peace before us*

OR

HWB 418 *Move in our midst*