

# Oh, that you would reveal your mystery

*(Isaiah 64, Luke 2, Ephesians 3)*

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## INTRODUCTION

Advent may well be one of the most overlooked yet most important times of the year. We live in a culture that depreciates the value of waiting. One sad consequence of this is the increased difficulty we have embracing God's promises that seem so long in coming. We're in danger of losing our ability to yearn for the revelation of God's mystery in our world.

Those leading worship may feel pressured to begin the Christmas celebrations early instead of on December 25. But if we do, by the time Christmas Day arrives, many may already be tired of "Christmas." The materials in this Advent-Christmas resource strive to add richness to the four Sundays of Advent so they will be filled with edifying anticipation. They call us to prepare our hearts and minds to celebrate the birth of Christ, but they also have us "zoom out" from ancient Bethlehem to see what the birth of Jesus Christ means in God's dream for today.

Year B lectionary texts give prominence to the gospel of Mark. Because this gospel includes no stories about the birth or childhood of Jesus, the focus on the culmination or end of all things is the most insistent within the cycle. The Scripture texts draw our attention to the eschatological nature of Advent and help us look forward to the second coming of Christ when the kingdom of God will be on earth, as it is in heaven. This focus has been part of Advent teachings since the fourth century, and we are happy to continue this tradition.

Faithful preparation during Advent puts Christmas into its proper place, not as a comforting destination where chestnuts roast on an open fire, but as the

completely disruptive in-breaking of the God who, through this birth, reveals the divine mystery and sheds new light on all things.

The first reading of the season cries out, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down . . . (Isaiah 64:1a). Other texts of the season continue to illumine God's reign, marking the dismantling of every other reign. We still cry out with the prophets and evangelists that every human reign is tainted by disorder, sin, injustice, and oppression.

As our group from Mennonite Church Alberta gathered to write these materials, there were several places of serious political unrest in the world. The presidents and government forces that held power in the situations we identified were finding ways to make their disordered reigns appear normal and good. Some even controlled the media to ensure only their version of the message would be broadcast. The prominent places of global unrest may have shifted by the time we use these resources in our congregations, but their nature will undoubtedly be similar.

The biblical pictures of those damaged by disordered reigns reveal another story, a counternarrative. The Bible gives voice to the poor, the dying, the outcast, and the silenced. Similarly, the church is called to lift out the testimony of those in our time who long for the reign of God to be revealed in their places of need. Advent tunes us in to their voices so that their cries become our cries, their hopes become our hopes.

Advent proclaims that the days of evil are numbered and that oppressive regimes have only one ultimate future: utter destruction and replacement by God's reign.

### Permission to photocopy

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

Subscribers to *Leader* may download these documents at [www.leaderonline.org](http://www.leaderonline.org). Click on the desired quarter, enter the username *Advent14* and the password *rde9234*. They are both case sensitive.

## GUIDELINES FOR WORSHIP PLANNERS

The Advent-Christmas season features six weekly movements of worship: gathering/praising, confessing, hearing God's Word, responding, and sending. These are essential movements of worship, but they can be expressed in many ways.

Whenever we gather as an intergenerational worshipping community to breathe in the love, grace, and righteousness of God, it is natural and good to begin with praise for our God, who is worthy and delights in our worship. Focusing on God's holiness quickly reveals our need for confession, for inner realignment with God's good purposes. This in turn whets our appetite for instruction, for hearing God's Word, which in turn calls for a response of faithfulness. Strengthened by worship, the gathered family of God prepares to scatter and serve, knowing the challenges to faithfulness will increase as we do. For this reason we send one another out with words of blessing.

For the sake of simplicity these resources organize the order of worship according to the list above, trusting that congregations will glorify God with their rich and varied expression of them. We recognize that not all congregations will structure their worship in a visibly categorized liturgy. However, we encourage worship planners to be deliberate about including these important movements of worship within their worship style.

## FOCUS STATEMENTS

The focus statements for each Sunday express a cry to God that is given voice in each Sunday's theme. During the Advent Sundays, the first part of each focus statement declares what we observe in our world, while the second speaks to what is being done, has been done, or will be done as God's kingdom comes. During Christmas 1 and Epiphany, the cries are replaced by an acknowledgement of Emmanuel—God with us—and what God's coming means to the future of the world.

## VISUAL ELEMENTS

The weekly themes are expressed visually in simple line drawings. These designs lend themselves to a variety of banner styles. If there are avid quilters in the congregation, the image may be appliquéd and filled with stuffing to add depth and life. Layered, cut felt designs would create a different mood, but could be equally engaging. Children could be invited to color simple line drawings of the weekly themes during worship.

These resources also offer a collection of thematically selected photos of Bethlehem taken by Doug Klassen on a recent tour. These could be projected during worship to help the Bible's ancient words speak in relation to the current Holy Land/Middle East context.

## MUSIC

### *Theme song*

Congregations have widely varying tastes in music. And yet, there is value in marking the season of Advent with a repeated song. Therefore, we are offering songs that can serve this purpose well. Team members Will and Ana Loewen have collaborated to compose a song, "Reveal Your Mystery," whose lyrics reflect the Advent-Christmas theme (see page 31). The piano accompaniment will be available on [www.leaderonline.org](http://www.leaderonline.org). Alternatively we suggest using *Sing the Story (STS)* 15, "Hope Is a Candle."

## CALLS TO WORSHIP

The shift from our daily individual lives into active participation in corporate worship is a deliberate shift of focus and attitude. Therefore the calls to worship begin with the common opening line "Come, let us worship in faith the God who is here and desires our worship [*pause*]" to redirect our focus to God, and to give time to adjust our attitudes. This is followed by expressions of faith and praise, adapted from the Scripture texts for the day.

## CONFESSION

The Advent prayers contain a deliberate movement from the individual to the corporate as we draw nearer to Christmas, for we are accountable to God not only as individuals but also as part of a collective identity. The first week's focus is individual, and by the final week the prayer of confession includes a time of confession for wrongs committed by the worldwide church throughout history, as an attempt to help us rethink and face our shared history with honesty and humility.

The prayers work with symbols of darkness and light to help the worshiper feel the heaviness of confession (darkness) followed by the peace and calm brought about by God's assurance (light). This emotive movement can be supported as follows: Begin the time of confession by turning off all the lights and spending a minute or two in silence. After the silence, project

and read the prayer of confession responsively. Turn the lights back on for the words of assurance. The PowerPoint background could be a dark color for the confessional words contrasted by joyful background colors for the assurance text.

Between the confession and the assurance specific, alternate words are provided to be sung to the tune of the song *STS 10*, “Come! Walk in the Light.” After the assurance, the song can be sung with its original words.

After Christmas Day we enter a season of alleluias, so the prayers of confession become joyous confessions of faith that affirm what God has brought into being through the incarnation.

## SERMON SEEDS

Since the words of the prophets and the psalms are incorporated into the calls to worship, the sermon seeds address primarily the gospel texts. These are challenging texts and require diligent exegetical work to remain both faithful to the text and to point to the birth of Christ. They bring us face-to-face with the reality of Christ’s coming, which took place in the midst of struggle and tension, a stark contrast to traditional, quaint images of a sleepy, cozy little Bethlehem town so often associated with Christmas. Then as now, God was and is at work amidst the brokenness of our world.

## CHILDREN’S TIME

Can the children’s time help children discover and claim Advent as part of a Christian counternarrative? Can it help younger children understand the substance of the worship theme? Can it facilitate a rich encounter between the child and God? We believe it can. Provide an introduction that helps children center and connect with that place inside where they know God is near. Intentionally nurture a congregational ethos where children know they are a precious and loved part of the family of faith.

Use the children’s story as an opportunity to focus on children as an integral part of the worshiping family of God. Invite children to open their hearts and wills to the loving heart, will, and story of God. The children’s time ideas in this resource choose one idea from the weekly worship resources and translate it into the world of a four- to eight-year-old child. If the storyteller frames the story with “stilling” prayers at the beginning and a short prayer of gratitude at the end, it will bless the children. It will also help the child within the listening adult draw nearer to the worship theme and the heart of God.

## DRAMAS

The online dramas created as supplementary resources for the four Sundays of Advent focus on the relational drama in a family where conflict and dysfunction results in a young adult son leaving home. He takes the baby Jesus from their large family crèche with him. The weekly scenes provide opportunities to deepen or offer a foil for the week’s theme. Performing the dramas following the Scripture readings and before the sermon will help the congregation engage God’s Word. Using the drama anecdotally in the sermon will help deepen its impact.

## BLESSING AND SENDING

This worship element shifts the worshipers’ focus to that empowered service, thereby preparing them to participate in God’s mission. Sending prayers and hymns connected to the sermon texts have been composed by the writers or selected from hymnal resources.



*From left to right : Harry Harder, Elsie Rempel, Valerie Wiebe, Bruce Jantzen, Dave Bergen, Garth Ewert Fisher*

# Reveal Your Mystery

Music by: Ana Loewen  
Lyrics by: William Loewen

1. Rend the hea - vens, Lord, and come down to the peo - ple who call to  
2. Make a straight road for God to walk. See the king - dom is close at  
3. Through - out his - t'ry God had a plan. For His wis - dom to be re -

6

S  
you. We are an - xious, we live in fear. We wait to see what you will  
hand. The mc - ssi - ah comes for the poor. bring ing good news through - out the  
vealed. Ho - ly pro - phets and the a - postles. On - ly now see what was con -

B

12

S  
do. Like the far - mer wat - ching rain clouds, Like the mo - ther with  
land. To bind up the bro - ken hear - ted. To bring free - dom  
cealed. We share the same pro - mise God made. We share the same

B

18

S  
la - bour pains, Like re - fu - gees miss - ing their homes,  
to the cap - tives. To pro - vide for those in mourn -  
body of Christ. We share the same in - her - i - tance.

B

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## Reveal Your Mystery

24 Refrain

S  
ing. We yearn deep - ly for your re - turn. Re - veal your  
In the year of the Ju - bi - lee.  
For the whole earth - Gen - tiles and Jews.

B

29

S  
mys - tery, Re - veal your whole - ness. Re - veal your

B

33

S  
beau - ty and come down to us. O Re - veal your love. O Re - veal

B

39

S  
your joy. O Re veal your hope. Shine in - to our world.

B

1, 2, 3. 6

1, 2, 3. 6

# *Advent One – Sunday, November 30, 2014*

## *Oh, that you would reveal your hope*



**Focus statement:** In a world of anxiety and fear we call on God to rend the heavens and come down in power.

**Texts:** Isaiah 64:1-9; Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37

### **Music**

#### **Gathering**

STS 7      *Come, Come Emmanuel*

STS 15     *Hope Is a Candle*

“It’s Time for the Reign of God” Brian Doerksen, Steve Mitchinson

#### **Confessing**

STS 10     *Come! Walk in the Light*

#### **Proclaiming**

HWB 175   *O Savior, Rend the Heavens*

STJ 27     *God of the Bible*

STJ 31     *He Came Down*

“Reveal Your Mystery” Will and Ana Loewen

“Hope of the Nations” Brian Doerksen

“Days of Elijah” Robin Mark

#### **Responding**

HWB 585   *In Your Sickness*

STJ 54     *Longing for Light*

STJ 95     *I Want to Walk as a Child of the Light*

“Even So, Lord Jesus, Come” Steve Bell

### **Call to worship** (adapted from Isaiah 64 and Psalm 80)

**Leader:** Come, let us worship in faith the God who is here and desires our worship [*pause*].  
Redeeming God, show your face, so that we, your people, would share your hope.

**All:**      *Oh, that you would reveal your hope to us, O Lord.*

**People:** Let your light shine, so that the nations would see your glory.

**Leader:** Speak to us, for your words do not pass away.

**People:** Walk with us, and the peoples tremble.

**Leader:** Restore us, that we might be saved.

**People:** Mold us, and we will bend to your will.

**All:**      *Rend the heavens and come down, O Lord of hope.*

### **Confession** [*Turn off lights and observe a minute of silence.*]

**Leader:** Today in this safe but dark and holy place we become aware of your presence, God.  
We focus not on our sins as is our habit, but instead on the sins done against us.

**People:** We have suffered rejection, hurt, and abuse. People have hurt us in our childhood, at school, at work, and even in church. These hurts continue to shape us in unhealthy ways.

**Leader:** We are crumbling clay that needs to be reformed and rebuilt by you, God, the Potter.

**People:** Heal our places of shame, Lord.

**Leader:** To “forgive those who trespass against us,” we ask for strength to release our wounds to you, to stop holding onto them.

**People:** Heal us, Lord.

**All:** Restore our hope, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

*[Observe a minute of silence. Then sing, “Come, restore us, O Lord, come restore us again, O Lord” to the tune of “Come! Walk in the Light.” Turn on lights.]*

### *Assurance*

**Leader:** God, the faithful Potter, longs to remake and restore his children.

**All:** God’s power rekindles hope in us and gives us life, real life. Thanks be to God.

### *Children’s time*

*[After settling into an awareness of God’s presence with a sentence such as “God, help us quiet our hearts and bodies and notice your love around and in us,” tell this story about a plush toy named Revy. For today’s story she could sport several bandages.]*

I’d like to introduce you to my friend Revy. I call her Revy because our theme asks for God’s mystery to be revealed. Revy will have many adventures and learn something about God’s mystery for each of the next six weeks. In today’s story, Revy learns something about hope.

We all get hurt sometimes. Some children, like my friend Revy here, get hurt again and again. You can tell that happens because of her bandages. Sometimes Revy gets hurt because she falls down on her own. But sometimes she gets hurt because others push her around on the playground.

It scares Revy when she gets pushed around. It hurts her much more than when she just falls down because she’s afraid of getting hurt again. So Revy often runs home or hides when others show up on the playground.

But today Revy didn’t have to run away. She is really happy today, because a new neighbor has become a real friend; a friend with whom she feels safe and loved. Today her friend called on her and they walked to the playground together. She likes playing with her new friend because her friend likes her, is gentle, and likes to have fun. This friendship gives Revy hope and helps her be a good friend too.

God wants us all to live lives that are full of hope. God sent Jesus to us to give us hope; to help us know that God is at work making the world a more loving and hope-filled place. That’s why we start Advent by learning about God’s hope.

**Prayer:** Thank you, God, for friends who give us hope. Amen.

### *Sermon seeds*

The church year begins with a cry to God that things are not right in this world. The cries of the prophet and the psalmist plead for God to intervene, to break into the suffering and injustice in our world and set things right.

Consider focusing on Mark 13:24-37. This is one of the most confusing and troublesome chapters of the whole gospel and finds its conceptual key in the image of birth pangs introduced in verse 8. By verse 24, we hear Jesus challenge his followers not to be afraid if the temple falls or if their lives are put on trial. These are not endings, says Jesus, but beginnings of what is to come. Apocalyptic texts such as this can tempt people to work out their own timetable of the end, or to turn to some of the popular end-times personalities to do it for them.

This Sunday provides a rich opportunity to offer a biblical understanding of second coming theology. Jesus urges us to be watchful, alert, and awake. The judgment that he predicts will come upon the temple will come upon the whole world. So, like the night watchman, we are to be alert. However, alert does not mean fearful. God’s actions are always good news for the faithful.

How does this relate to looking forward to celebrating Christ's birth? It focuses our attention on the One who accomplished the impossible—even though he was born and lived under the nose of the most powerful forces on earth. We too live in circumstances that may erode our ability to imagine how God can possibly accomplish what God has set out to do. We need to have our hope renewed.

### **Responding**

Sing a song of response, take the offering, and invite someone to share a short testimony on the topic of finding God's hope.

**Sending:** HWB 760 "God Our Security . . ."

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## *Advent Two – Sunday, December 7, 2014*

# *Oh, that you would reveal your peace*



**Focus statement:** In a disturbed and noisy world we hear God say, "Comfort, comfort my people."

**Texts:** Isaiah 40:1-11; Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13; Mark 1:1-8; 2 Peter 3:8-15a

### **Music**

#### **Gathering**

- STJ 16 *Praise with Joy the World's Creator*
- STS 4 *Rejoice, Rejoice, the Savior Comes*
- STS 16 *Peace before Us*
- "Mountain of God" Phil Campbell Enns

#### **Confessing**

- STS 10 *Come! Walk in the Light*

#### **Proclaiming**

- HWB 174 *Bless'd Be the God of Israel*
- HWB 176 *Comfort, Comfort, O My People*
- HWB 183 *On Jordan's Banks*
- "Let the Peace of God Reign" Darlene Zschech

#### **Responding**

- HWB 599 *He Leadeth Me*
- STJ 59 *Come and Fill Our Hearts*
- STJ 76 *The Lord Bless You and Keep You*
- "Instruments of Your Peace" Deby Dearman, Kirk Dearman
- "As It Is in Heaven" Ed Cash, Matt Maher

### **Call to worship** (adapted from Isaiah 40)

Leader: Come, let us worship in faith the God who is here and desires our worship [*pause*].  
Redeeming God, work in our hearts so that we, your people, would share in your peace.



**All:** *Oh, that you would reveal your peace to us, O Lord.*

**Leader:** The paths of our world are not straight; the ditches are littered with our friends.

**People:** **Still, we listen for the voice in the wilderness, “Prepare a way for the Lord.”**

**Leader:** Behold, our God is coming.

**People:** **God speaks peace into our noisy world.**

**All:** *“Comfort, comfort, my people,” says our God.*

**Confession** [*Turn off lights and observe a minute of silence.*]

**Leader:** Today, in this safe but dark and holy place we become aware of your presence, God. We look inward at wrongs we have done against others in our family, our neighborhood, our workplaces, and our churches. Sometimes we were paying back, sometimes just being mean, and sometimes we didn’t realize the wrong we were doing.

**People:** **We desire John’s baptism of repentance, confessing our sins.**

**Leader:** We ask you, Lord, to take our sin, including our inward secrets, and make us new.

**People:** **Forgive us our trespasses.**

**All:** *Restore our peace, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.*

[*Observe a minute of silence. Sing the words, “Come, forgive me, Lord, come forgive me, O Lord” to the tune of “Come! Walk in the Light.” Turn on lights.*]

**Assurance**

**Leader:** God speaks peace to us, his people. In peace, we proclaim God’s comfort to each other; reassuring one another of God’s forgiveness.

**All:** *God is patient with us; God walks with us, helps us deal with the sin that bogs us down, and gives us the gift of peace.*

[*Sing “Come! Walk in the Light,” inserting “light of peace” in place of “light of day.”*]

**Children’s time**

[*After settling into an awareness of God’s presence with a sentence such as “God, help us quiet our hearts and bodies and notice your love around and in us,” tell this story about a plush toy named Revy.*]

Do you remember my friend Revy? Why did I call her Revy? (Because our theme asks for God’s mystery to be revealed.) Revy is having many adventures and learning something about God’s mystery each week this season. In today’s story, Revy learns something about peace, so let’s start by singing *STS 16, “Peace before Us.”* [*Invite the congregation to help you sing.*]

Revy had a little problem this week. She got into a big fight with her little brother. She was carefully building a tower of blocks when he walked by and knocked it over. This made Revy so mad that she punched him and made him cry.

Has this ever happened to you?

Well, after Revy made her baby brother cry, she felt really bad because she had been so mean to him. She remembered what her mom had told her many times: “Use your words, not your fists” and “Remember that he’s too little to know better.”

Has this happened to you too? What do you think Revy did?

Revy hugged her brother, said she was sorry, and played hide-and-seek with him, which they both liked. She decided she could build towers during his nap time when he wouldn’t knock them down. It felt good to make peace like that. She could almost imagine Jesus smiling at her.

**Prayer**

Thank you, God, for peacemakers like Revy, and for Jesus, the Prince of Peace, who helps us make peace with each other. Amen.

### *Sermon seeds*

The prophetic calls for God to intervene become prescriptive on this Sunday. Both Isaiah and the psalmist cry to God to bring God's peace to the world. The opening line of Mark's gospel tells us God has heard the people's prayers and has indeed responded. Just as boldly as Isaiah's words announce the end of the exile, so John the Baptist boldly announces the coming of the Messiah of God.

People were not expecting this announcement to come in combination with a call to repentance. They were waiting for a figure on a white horse, for companies of soldiers that would lead the people of Israel in the defeat of Rome. Instead, they are confronted by a man covered in camel's hair who invites people to identify with their ancestors' walk to freedom, to walk through the waters. This walk in the waters combines repentance with deliverance; it is a walk that is necessary for entering God's new kingdom. It leads not to an overthrow of the Roman oppressors but to a kingdom of peace, in a deeper sense of the word.

As Christmas Day approaches, many people find comfort and meaning in rituals they celebrate every year. But those rituals can lose their sparkle over time. Growth and newness can occur when familiar rituals are altered by actions that align with God's intentions, which lead to the peace of Christ ruling our hearts and lives. Adjust your Christmas rituals by inviting new people to celebrate Christmas with you, initiating a gathering in your neighborhood, or by Christmas caroling for those who are in extended care. These changes may be unnerving, but they also hold the promise of renewal as we extend the peace of Christ to others.

### *Responding*

Pass the peace of Christ to one another, sing one of the songs of response, and invite someone to share a story of walking in the peace of God.

*Sending:* STS 126 "God of Faithfulness . . ."

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## *Advent Three – Sunday, December 14, 2014*

# *Oh, that you would reveal your joy*



**Focus statement:** In a world of grief and despair God's Spirit clothes us in celebration.

**Texts:** Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Psalm 126; Luke 1:46b-55; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8, 19-28

### *Music*

#### *Gathering*

STJ 13     *My Soul Is Filled with Joy*  
STJ 1     *We Sing to You, O God*  
STS 124   *My Soul Cries Out*

#### *Confessing*

STS 10     *Come! Walk in the Light*

#### *Proclaiming*

HWB 184   *Hark! The Glad Sound!*  
HWB 185   *Hail to the Lord's Anointed*  
HWB 181   *My Soul Proclaims with Wonder*

### *Responding*

- HWB 369 *Lord, Whose Love in Humble Service*  
HWB 644 *When Morning Gilds the Skies*  
HWB 334 *Christ Is the World's True Light*  
HWB 498 *He Comes to Us as One Unknown*  
"Jesus Be the Center" Michael Frye  
"Immanuel" Stuart Townend

### *Call to worship (adapted from Isaiah 61)*

Leader: Come, let us worship in faith the God who is here and desires our worship [*pause*].  
Redeeming God, work in our hearts, that our worship would be filled with the joy that comes from remembering your splendor.

**All:** *Oh, that you would reveal your joy to us, O Lord.*

Leader: We celebrate the year of the Lord's favor,

**People:** **a time of comfort for those who mourn.**

Leader: There will be crowns instead of ashes,

**People:** **joyful anointing instead of mourning,**

Leader: cloaks of praise instead of spirits of despair,

**People:** **Cities of renewal instead of devastation.**

**All:** *The Lord will wrap us in robes of righteousness.  
Come, O God, and clothe us in garments of salvation.*

### *Confession [Turn off lights and observe a minute of silence.]*

Leader: Today in this safe but dark and holy place we become aware of your presence, God.  
We focus now on our congregation and the wider Anabaptist Mennonite church family.

**People:** **We are a faithful church, but sometimes we've kept our riches to ourselves.**

Leader: Sometimes we have excluded the inquirer who has come to our door seeking faith. Sometimes we've refused to admit our weaknesses. Sometimes we've been too quiet in the land. Sometimes we've helped those far away but ignored our neighbors. Sometimes we've tried so hard to serve that we've forgotten the joy of worshipping you. Hear our honest confessions, O God, and remember us in mercy.

**People:** **Restore to us the joy of being your faithful people.**

**All:** *Restore our joy, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.*

*[Observe a minute of silence and then sing "Come, have mercy on us" to the tune of "Come! Walk in the Light." Turn on lights.]*

### *Assurance*

Leader: The Lord, has done great things in and through his church, and has bestowed rich blessings on us, his Anabaptist people.

**People:** **When we place our lives into your hands, O God, you willingly transform our timid hearts with your infectious joy.**

*[Sing STS 10, "Come! Walk in the Light," using the words, "Come, walk in the joy, come walk in the joy of Christ."]*

## *Children's time*

*[After settling into an awareness of God's presence with a sentence such as "God, help us quiet our hearts and bodies and notice your loving joy around and in us," tell this story about a plush toy named Revy.]*

Last week, Revy learned how to be a peacemaker with her baby brother by playing hide-and-seek with him and then building with her blocks while he was napping. Today, Revy's got a problem that might be harder to solve.

*[Revy is sitting there, feeling dejected.]* Her interviewer notices and asks, "What's the matter, Revy? Why do you look so sad?" The answer comes quickly, "It doesn't feel like Christmas yet!"

The interviewer asks, "Why? What's wrecking your Christmas spirit?"

Revy explodes, "Lots of things! The commercials on TV just make me feel poor, because they make me want stuff I don't have! Everyone in the house is stressed because they haven't finished shopping for presents yet. And, and then this morning I went and peeked in the cupboard I wasn't supposed to look in. I saw my present in there, and now I feel really yucky."

The interviewer answers, "Oh, that's too bad. What can we do about it?"

"Don't know."

At that point Revy hears the doorbell ring. Her friend is there and says, "Want to come and play outside? A bunch of us are out sliding on the snow hill."

Revy loved that idea, and cheered up quickly. She had so much fun playing with her friends, she forgot all about feeling poor and about feeling guilty for having seen her present. When she came back in, the people in her house seemed happier too. Maybe they had enjoyed the quiet after she turned off the TV. With that extra joy around, it felt much more like Christmas!

**Prayer:** Thank you, God, for the joy that comes from playing together in healthy ways. Amen.

## *Sermon seeds*

On the third Sunday of Advent, the theme of joy emerges from the text and sets the tone for our celebration. Joy is more than an emotion. Joy inspires Isaiah to call for celebration in the midst of hardship; it gives Paul the passion to preach even when he is in prison. Seek the joy of the Lord this day.

As Christmas Day approaches, the season's commercialized promises of joy can become distracting or even oppressive. Every year we are asked to believe that tinsel, gifts, and huge credit card bills will bring the joy that we long for. But we know that while decorations and gifts can aid us in our celebrations, they are not ends in themselves. Abiding joy is found in the search for God's gift, a gift we often have difficulty recognizing. John 1:26 confronts us with a challenge: "Among you stands one whom you do not know." Jesus may be as hard to recognize within our culture's Christmas celebrations as he was when he was born in Bethlehem and walked in Galilee.

Preachers can give their congregations the gift of a new perspective this Sunday. The greatest Christmas gift we can offer may be an invitation to a new or renewed relationship with Jesus Christ. The foundation for that relationship is gratitude (giving thanks in all circumstances, 1 Thessalonians 5:18-19) in the freedom of the Holy Spirit. If people in the congregation are saying, "It doesn't feel like Christmas yet," invite them to seek a renewal of their relationship with God as a more fruitful way of rediscovering the Christmas spirit than spending another two hours at the local mall.

## *Responding*

Sing a song of response, take the offering, and invite someone to share a short testimony on the topic of finding God's joy.

**Sending:** Go with the One who came as a child, for he is Lord of all.

Seek the One still unknown, who calls us and brings joy into our lives!

Join your song with the One who brings joy to the world!

# *Advent Four – Sunday, December 21, 2014*

## *Oh, that you would reveal your hope*



**Focus statement:** In a world of loneliness and isolation God makes a home with us.

**Texts:** 2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26; Romans 16:25-27; Luke 1:26-38

### **Music**

#### **Gathering**

- STJ 10     *Spirit, Working in Creation*  
STJ 14     *Lord Jesus, You Shall Be My Song*  
STS 1      *Praise the One Who Breaks the Darkness*  
“Magnificat (Holy Is His Name)” John Michael Talbot  
“Ready My Heart” Lois Shuford

#### **Confessing**

- STS 10     *Come! Walk in the Light*

#### **Proclaiming**

- HWB 180   *The Angel Gabriel*  
HWB 178   *Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus*  
HWB 211   *Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming*  
STJ 34     *Loving Spirit*  
STJ 39     *Ubi Caritas (Where True Love)*  
“Emmanuel (Hallowed Manger Ground)” Chris Tomlin/Ed Cash  
“Born in Bethlehem” Mac Powell, David Carr, Tai Anderson, Brad Avery, Mark Lee

#### **Responding**

- STJ 44     *The Love of God*  
STJ 109    *There Is More Love Somewhere*  
HWB 431   *God Be with You*

### **Call to worship**

**Leader:** Come, let us worship in faith the God who is here and desires our worship [*pause*]. Redeeming God, work in our hearts, that our worship would be filled with your redeeming love.

**All:**     *Oh, that you would reveal your love to us, O Lord.*

**Leader:** When Mary was sent away, she found an embrace in your arms.

**People:** **When we feel isolated by the world, we find security in your kingdom.**

**Leader:** The world does not see us as the Lord does.

**People:** **They do not value us as the eternal One does.**

**Leader:** The world cannot love us like the Lord does.

**People:** **They cannot comfort us as our Creator does.**

**All:**     *When others abandon us, God makes a home with us.*

**Confession** [*Turn off lights and observe a minute of silence.*]

**Leader:** Today, in this safe but dark and holy place we become aware of your presence, God. In your presence we focus on your worldwide church and its story across the centuries of church history. We offer confession on her behalf because her story is also our story. At times we have killed enemies with whose faith or politics we have differed, instead of loving them. We have been the agents of slavery instead of freeing people to live within your reign of righteousness. We have perpetuated racism and devalued those you call your own.

**People:** **We have acted in your name, but have often failed to reflect your nature.**

**Leader:** Most of all, we have failed to demonstrate to all God's people the boundless love of God in Christ. We confess these heavy sins to you, Lord, knowing we cannot carry the burden of these sins committed in your name. We pray that you would remove the weight of the church's sin from our shoulders.

**People:** **Restore your love in us, part of your worldwide church. Grant even to us the expansive love revealed in this holy season.**

**All:** *Restore our love, Lord God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.*

*[Observe silence and then sing the words, "Come, embrace our world, come embrace our world, O God" to the tune of "Come! Walk in the Light." Turn on lights.]*

**Assurance**

**Leader:** The Lord declares: I will gladly restore my love in you, my never-ending love for the church and for all peoples. [*Sing "Come! Walk in the Light"*]

**Children's time**

*[Settle with the children by quietly imagining what it would be like if God's love and fairness were in charge of the world. Review what Revy experienced last week before beginning this story. As the story begins, Revy is sleeping in a little sleeping bag.]*

Shhhhhh. Let's be very quiet, so that Revy won't wake up before she's finished resting. You see, Revy went to a puppet show but was not let in. She had taken all her allowance money along, but it wasn't enough money to pay for the tickets. Revy went back home and cried herself to sleep.

Have you ever been disappointed like that? How can we help her once she wakes up? Could we share some of our money with her so she can go to the next puppet show? What else could we do?

*[Revy wakes up with a happy sigh.]* "Hello, my church friends. Guess what, I just had a wonderful dream. In my dream, I was back at the puppet show. But this time, all the children who had not been let in before were let in because other children with money helped us pay for our tickets. In my dream, the puppet show was super funny. After the show there was a party with delicious snacks."

*[The storyteller invites a child to tell Revy about their plans.]*

Revy says, "That is amazing! I can hardly wait! Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

The storyteller comments, "Revy's dream is like God's dream, and by planning to help Revy we were joining God's dream. Isn't that amazing? God just loves it when people help each other and share. This makes me so happy that I'd like to share a little snack with you right after we say a prayer."

**Prayer:** Thank you, God, for your dream of love, sharing, and celebrating. Amen.

**Sermon seeds**

What began as a promise to David now comes to fruition in the angel's words to Mary, who yields her life to the purposes of God. This promise is based in God's extravagant love. God is coming. Jesus will make his home with us. Love's reign is about to begin (Luke 1:26-38).

The first three Sundays in Advent present heavier texts for the preacher. This Sunday's texts are not light but are saturated with a spirit of celebration! God's promise to David about an everlasting kingdom is about to be fulfilled. The good news of this reign is that the poor, the marginalized, the lowly, and the hungry will be

brought to the front of the line. With just four days remaining until Christmas, this is an opportunity to help the congregation imagine a world where Mary's song and dance come to fulfillment. Tell stories of times and places where the gospel of Jesus Christ has brought good news of liberation to a person or situation. Share faith stories, both in the sermon and in the response time, that speak to the true meaning of Christmas by casting light on God's liberating love.

### **Responding**

Sing a song of response, take the offering, and invite someone to share a short testimony on the topic of finding God's love.

**Sending:** Our souls proclaim the greatness of God,  
our spirits exalt God our Savior.  
In love the mighty One has done great deeds  
and has filled us with good things.  
*Depart now, in peace, to proclaim the greatness of God!*

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## *Christmas One – Sunday, December 28, 2014*

# *Your beauty is revealed*



**Focus statement:** Seeing the child, we respond join with all creation in adoration and praise.

**Texts:** Isaiah 61:10–62:3; Psalm 148; Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 2:22-40

### **Music**

#### **Gathering**

STS 19     *Jesus, Jesus, Oh, What a Wonderful Child*  
STS 21     *Sing We the Virgin Mary*  
HWB 318   *Joy to the World*  
HWB 201   *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*

#### **Confessing**

HWB 191   *O Little Town of Bethlehem*  
STJ 61     *How Can We Be Silent*

#### **Proclaiming**

HWB 212   *O Come, All Ye Faithful*  
HWB 334   *Christ Is the World's True Light*  
HWB 215   *What Child Is This*  
"Born That We May Have Life" Chris Tomlin, Ed Cash, Matt Maher

#### **Responding**

HWB 498   *He Comes to Us as One Unknown*  
HWB 199   *The First Noel, the Angels Did Say*  
STS 26     *Helpless and Hungry*  
"Celebrate the Child" Michael Card

*Call to worship (adapted from Luke 2 and Psalm 148)*

Leader: Come, let us worship in faith the God who is here and desires our worship [*pause*].  
Incarnate God, work in our hearts, that our worship would be filled with the joy that comes from remembering your beauty.

**All:** *In a little child, God is revealed to us.*

Leader: This is God's plan of freedom, held up for the nations to see.

**People:** **A revealing light to all peoples, the glory of God's kingdom people.**

Leader: We rejoice in our rescue and celebrate creation's redemption.

**People:** **The hills and the mountains praise the Lord.**

Leader: The animals, wild and tame, all kings and peoples of the earth, lightning and hail, snow and fog, women and men, old and young,

**All:** *all praise the Lord together. Our Messiah has come. Alleluia!*

*Confession of faith*

Leader: O Lord, we confess our joy in you. We cannot keep silent.

**People:** **You came to live among us and have brought us salvation.**

Leader: Your salvation is for all peoples, all cultures, all religious communities, all humanity.

**People:** **Because you gave us a new name and have declared us beautiful, we cannot keep silent.**

Leader: When the time was right, God sent us his Son.

**People:** **Let us praise the Lord for drawing near to us, for coming among us.**

Leader: Come, young and old, male and female, all God's people. Let us praise God together.

**All:** *Our hearts are brimming with the Spirit of God. God's salvation is for all peoples. We will not keep silent!*

*Children's time*

*[Settle with the children by quietly imagining they are babies who are being lovingly held by their favorite older person. Today's story is told by Revy.]*

"I was at my grandparents' for a fantastic sleepover! I really like being with them because they're always so happy to see me. They love me and gave me a lamb stuffy to sleep with that bleats like a real one.

"Even better, I like the way they spend lots of time with me. They admire me when I do my tricks for them. When I get tired of that they take me on their laps and read good stories to me.

"While I was on the sleepover, we baked my favorite cookies together, and I got to eat lots of cookie dough. While we were making the cookies, I asked Grandma to tell one of my favorite stories out of her head and she did. It was a story Jesus told about a good shepherd who rescued the little lost sheep and then had a party to celebrate finding the lost sheep.

"That story makes me feel good every time I hear it, because it shows how much God loves little lambs, even those who get lost. And Grandma says that's how much God loves us too. She says God is like a good shepherd who knows each of us by name and wants to help us when we get into trouble. Knowing that is always good, but it is especially good when you are away from Mommy and Daddy on a sleepover.

"That's my sleepover story. I hope you liked it."

The storyteller responds. "That was great storytelling, Revy! And it sounds like you've got wonderful grandparents. I wonder, do any of these children do things like that with their grandparents? [*Encourage a short time of sharing about good times with grandparents, and then prepare the group to pray.*]

**Prayer:** Thank you, God, for older people who love and bless little lambs, babies, and children.



### *Sermon seeds*

N. T. Wright, in *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* (2010), speaks about beauty as an echo of the voice of God. That beauty is uniquely evident when an older adult, a grandmother or grandfather, holds a baby. In that picture we see new life and with it hope for the future. For many this is a precious photo opportunity. But in it we also see a gentle revelation of how the older person has lived. Some people hesitate to hold children because it is too revealing. When Simeon and Anna embrace the Christ child, it is as though we can peer into their souls. They were both faithful servants of God and held the promises of God before them every day. They were not afraid to proclaim the words that came to them in that moment. Encourage the congregation to “hold the child Jesus” this day. What emotions do they feel inside? What do they see in the child’s eyes? What is going on in their souls? What will this mean for how they will live in 2015?

**Sending:** HWB 771 “Master Now You Are Dismissing Your Servant . . .”

Or:

We have seen the Christ child today!

We have held him in our hearts!

We have felt his love for us!

We can go now, and every day, in peace!

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## *Epiphany Sunday – January 4, 2014*

# *Your saving mystery revealed*



*With the arrival of the magi in Bethlehem we see yet another promise of God coming to fulfillment. Isaiah said, “Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.” Magi come from the East to discover the mystery. They see it revealed in the face of a child.*

**Focus statement:** God’s gift of grace empowers the church and invites all peoples to share in the riches of Christ.

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

### *Music*

#### *Gathering*

- STS 31     *Jesus, Be the Center*  
STS 32     *Oh, Beautiful Star of Bethlehem*  
HWB 197    *Angels We Have Heard on High*  
HWB 220    *Worship the Lord in the Beauty*  
“Here I Am to Worship” Matt Redman

#### *Confessing*

- STJ 61     *How Can We Be Silent*  
HWB 206    *Infant Holy, Infant Lowly*

#### *Proclaiming*

- HWB 214    *Morning Star, O Cheering Sight*  
HWB 200    *Where Is This Stupendous Stranger?*  
HWB 219    *Bright and Glorious Is the Sky*

- HWB 218 *As with Gladness Men of Old*  
 HWB 221 *Hail the Bless'd Morn*  
 HWB 222 *How Brightly Beams the Morning*

### **Responding**

- HWB 638 *God Is Working His Purpose Out*  
 HWB 210 *Good Christian Friends, Rejoice*  
 "Offering" Paul Baloche  
 "Everlasting" Brian Doerksen, Matt Unruh

### **Call to worship** (adapted from Ephesians 3)

**Leader:** Come, let us worship in faith the God who is here and desires our worship [*pause*].  
 Incarnate God, work in our hearts, that our worship would be filled with the awe that comes from remembering your saving mystery.

**All:** *In a little child, God is revealed to us.*

**Leader:** The mystery, kept hidden in ages past, has been made known.

**People:** **We, who were once outsiders, now share in the inheritance.**

**Leader:** All of us, part of the same body, share the same promise,

**People:** **through the gospel of Christ Jesus, our Lord.**

**Leader:** Throwing light on the inner workings of this mystery was God's plan from all eternity.

**People:** **God's gift of grace is a gift to be received by all.**

**All:** *In thankfulness we treasure the immeasurable riches of Christ.*

### **Confession of faith**

**Leader:** The glory of the Lord has risen; the Light of God has come.

**People:** **You are gathering your people, all peoples, those far away and those close at hand.**

**Leader:** The mystery, long hidden, has been revealed to all. Our hearts are jubilant!

**People:** **This mystery, until now, was revealed to the apostles and prophets.**

**Leader:** But now, in Jesus, all people are heirs to this mysterious promise.

**People:** **So grace is our rich inheritance, more precious than gold, frankincense, or myrrh.**

**All:** *We praise you, O God, for revealing your saving mystery. We will proclaim your promise with gratitude.*

### **Children's time**

[Settle with the children by quietly imagining what it would be like if everyone worshiped the baby Jesus. Revy starts humming a song, such as "O Come Little Children" and then stops when she notices that the children are listening to her.]

"Can you guess why I'm humming?" [Allow children a few guesses.] "I was humming because I'm so happy about the 'three kings party' that my family is planning. Have you ever had a three kings party? Raise your hand if you have. What do you think a three kings party is like?" [Allow and affirm several responses and make sure the connection to celebrating the visit of the wise men is made clear.]

"Those were good ideas. My family's three kings party is going to be like a children's open house. We're going to send invitations to our friends and neighbors. And we'll ask them to bring along some of their toys so we can make a big toy donation to the family shelter in our town.

"We even have neighbors from Ethiopia. I hope they will come to the party, because Ethiopia could be where the wise men came from on that first Christmas.

“When our guests come we will invite the children to dress up with things in our costume box. Then we’ll make shiny crowns and put them on so we can all be kings in a ‘Let’s worship Jesus parade.’ We’ll march right up to the wooden stable and stop to sing for baby Jesus and the others in there. After that, we’ll drive down to the family shelter in our costumes to take them the toys, and then we’ll come back and have yummy food and crown-shaped cookies.

“Don’t you think it sounds like fun? My mom says we will be joining up with God’s dream by partying with new neighbors and sharing some of our toys with poor children. I hope you’ll plan a three kings party too.”

**Prayer:** Thank you, Jesus, for celebrations where many different people gather to worship you and play together. Amen.

**Sermon seeds** (*Matthew 2:1-12*)


On an interior wall of the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem is a depiction of magi. When the Persians invaded in AD 614 the church was spared because the magi are portrayed as wearing Persian clothing. Local Muslim-Christian friendship is believed to be why the church was not destroyed under Hakim’s rule in 1009. It is interesting that when foreign powers discover the Christ child, there is peace. In our desperate desire for peace in our world, it is a temptation of the church to leave the Christ child behind for fear of being offensive. In the story of the magi today, and in countless situations since, lasting peace still comes out of an encounter with Christ.

**Responding**

Sing a song of response, take the offering, and invite someone to share a short testimony on the topic of how God’s mystery was revealed.

**Sending** (*adapted from Isaiah 60:1-6*)

People of God, arise! Shine! Your light has come; the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.  
Nations come to the light, and kings to the brightness of the dawn.  
Lift up your eyes and look around. See and be radiant.  
Let your hearts thrill and rejoice!

 **Pontius’ Puddle**

