# Hidden Gift Sunday

During Advent, many churches celebrate White Gift Sunday. The well-known history of this Sunday begins in 1903 in Painesville, Ohio, when a woman, concerned by her children arguing over gifts, suggested that they and the children of the Sunday school bring gifts to church for those in need. By wrapping the gifts in white paper their value was obscured, the love of giving without return was emphasized, and everyone was able to participate regardless of economic status.

In many communities today, poverty goes unseen. Churches still play a vital role not only in making someone’s Christmas with simple gifts, but also in declaring that unseen needs are not forgotten. This is the joy that Mary expresses in her Magnificat: that God sees the needs of God’s people and promises to rectify injustice, reconcile relationships, and mend the broken. The liturgical significance of actual gifts given in worship is the visibility of the offering and the ability of people of all ages to contribute.

This liturgy was originally prepared for the fourth Sunday of Advent 2017. It has been updated here to reflect the trials of 2020, including the anxiety and challenges of facing a global pandemic as well as the reality of racism and White privilege.[[1]](#footnote-1) Our attention was drawn, again, to the bigotry toward Indigenous people in Canada, especially evident in discrimination in our justice system and the continued lack of access to basic resources in many communities. We were also reminded, again, of the oppression of non-White people through the horrific shooting deaths of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd (among far too many others) in the United States, and in the urgent witness of the Black Lives Matter movement.

In making use of the readings for the third Sunday of Advent, this resource takes as its focus the spiritual gift of Joy. Neither mere happiness nor contentment, Joy is rooted in thankfulness for God’s presence in the midst of trial, and in the search for God’s transforming love in every moment. In times of anguish and strife, Joy can be obscured or seem less obvious. During this year especially, it has seemed a “hidden gift.” At a time when we’re becoming more aware of the ways White privilege obscures and confounds the dignity of non-White people, Joy can also be found in right relationship with those who have become hidden, marginalized, and deliberately silenced.

With this in mind, I’ve changed the name of this liturgy from White Gift Sunday to “Hidden Gift Sunday.” This liturgy includes a prayerful call to attend to racism and bigotry, and to seek out what is hidden in ourselves, each other, and community life. If we are to take joy in one another, our delight must be mutual; and for our delight to be mutual, it must be rooted in the dignity of those who have, far too often and easily, been hidden and obscured by White privilege. Only in relationship that seeks justice may we find true Joy, and our transformation in self-giving love.

## Gathering in God’s Name

### Opening Prayer (adapted from Psalm 126)

We are a people who dream, who long for joy.  
We are thankful for the gracious gifts of God.

We know that God does great things in our midst.  
We are thankful for the gracious gifts of God.

God has given us neighbours, near and far, to love.  
We are thankful for the gracious gifts of God.

As we gather and grow, give and receive…  
We give in thanks for God’s unfailing love.

### Carol

“Angels, from the Realms of Glory” (*Voices United* 36)

### An Advent Prayer of Confession and Healing

Even as we have lived with isolation and fear this year,  
**we have also made space for hope in our lives.**

With broken hearts, faltering steps, and a desire for healing with those who have been silenced, diminished, and objectified,  
**we seek peace with each and all, and commit to justice with our lives.**

As we greet strangers, neighbours and friends,  
**we make a place for joy in the chaos of our concern.**

Awaiting a future announced and promised by the Living God,  
**we make room for love in our habits, hearts, and homes.**

Holy One, you make the crooked ways straight and mend the broken soul.  
You assure the lost and lonely of your love; you bring joy to the suffering.  
On this day, as we offer simple gifts in the face of profound need,   
remind us how your grace grows in our giving and receiving.  
Inspire the rebirth of love―in our world and in our lives―  
as we dedicate ourselves to your justice and mercy.  
**Amen.**

### Passing the Peace

*In some churches, The Peace is shared toward the beginning of worship in order to include* *children before they go to Sunday school. Here, it serves to reinforce the practice just prayed for of greeting “strangers, neighbours, and friends,” in the presence of the whole community. The Peace may be offered in the midst of social distancing by folding arms over one’s chest to indicate a hug, by folding hands in prayer to indicate a blessing to another, or by simply bowing in mutual respect.*

The peace of Christ be with you all.  
**And also with you.**

### Refrain (VU 62)

In the deep and cold of winter,  
light breaks in to calm our fears.  
With the world we long for the season   
when the Joy of God draws near.

Help us sing the faithful story  
of the joy that is your glory.

Words: Andy O’Neill  
Music: Henry John Gauntlett

### Time with Children: “Everyone Brings a Gift*”*

*For Hidden Gift Sunday, it makes sense not only to share the story behind the celebration with the children, but also to connect it with the liturgical act of Offering. Because children often depart for Sunday school well before the offering, moving it forward in the liturgy presents a good opportunity for them to experience giving and receiving as an act of worship.*

*The leader can begin by sharing a version of the Annunciation, highlighting that Mary was anxious at the angel’s announcement because raising children is hard work, but that she was also overcome with joy. Raising children is mostly the work of parents, but it can also involve many others (“it takes a village”). We experience life not only as individuals but also in relationship and in community, with each person offering some sort of gift to us (wisdom, laughter, encouragement, challenge, etc.) and we, something to them.*

*The leader can ask the children what they think some of their gifts might be and what the gifts of the congregation might be. The leader can talk about the importance not only of using our gifts to help others but also of helping others to find and use their gifts, as well. Some of the older children and youth can be invited (and prepared in advance) to collect the offering and bring the donated gifts to the front of the sanctuary, as the gifts of the people are brought forward during the offering refrain.*

### Offering, and Presentation of Gifts

**Offering Refrain:** VU 55, v.4

What can I give him, poor as I am?  
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;  
If I were a wise man, I would do my part;  
Yet, what I can, I give him―give my heart.

### Prayer of Dedication

All things come from you, Creating God, and with joy we offer our gifts in return. Bless us, and what we do here, that we and all your people might experience the renewal of life you reveal in Christ Jesus. Open our hearts and minds to receive your continual gift of transformation this day, and always. **Amen.**

## Listening for God’s Word

### Prayer of Illumination

Comes a child, the servant king,  
Hope for all God’s children,  
Opening the Word of truth,  
With joy for every nation,  
With joy for every nation.

Words: Andy O’Neill  
Tune: Puer nobis nascitur (see VU 54)

### Isaiah 61:1‒4, 8‒11

May God’s word be a lamp to our feet,  
**and a light to our path.**

### Luke 1:47‒55

The Gospel of Jesus Christ.  
**Thanks be to God.**

*The gospel lesson here is the alternative reading in place of the Psalm. While some liturgists will choose to use the Magnificat (Luke 1:47‒55) on the Fourth Sunday of Advent with the theme of Love, it also fits completely with this Sunday and its traditional theme of Joy.*

### Anthem

*Here, or wherever is customary, the anthem might reflect the theme of Joy (God’s gifts in the midst of trial), the theme of “gift,” or even more broadly the theme of wonder and possibility we hear in Advent as the echoes of the prophets’ visions in Advent. One simple and powerful hymn that satisfies all of these, and which is appropriate for large and small choirs alike, is “Dream a Dream” (*More Voices *158). An arrangement of the haunting “I Sing of a Mayden” (15th century) would also be appropriate, or any setting of the Magnificat, or even of Ave Maria.*

### Sermon

*The gospel tells the story of the Annunciation and, more especially, Mary’s response. The gift hidden within her is an unexpected one and, for someone in Mary’s context―unwed, of low estate, in a first-century Roman-occupied backwater―could be seen as an inconvenient one. But Mary’s faith apprehends this gift as part of God’s story. Her song, the Magnificat, demonstrates not acquiescence but strength and purpose rooted in God’s vision. Her gift to the world was her willingness to have her life disrupted, turned upside-down, in order to help God do a new thing.*

*Years later, her son would share just this faith with his followers: that we must make room in our lives in order to care for those we know and those we don’t; to go beyond politeness and sentiment in order to reach for compassion, self-giving, and trust in God. Medieval theologian Meister Eckhart once asked, “What good is it to me if Mary gave birth to the Son of God 1,400 years ago, and I do not also give birth to the Son of God in my time and in my culture? We are all meant to be mothers of God.”*

*The sermon can develop the theme of the gift of God being obscured, or hidden, by the way we too often treat or ignore each other. With COVID-19, and events that have (again) given rise to the need for the Black Lives Matter movement, we have rediscovered that we ignore each other at our peril. Our physical isolation during the pandemic showed us our literal need for each other and for community, but cultural isolation of White people from non-White people also comes with great loss. Not only are we still far from God’s vision of peace and justice, we are far from the fulfillment of what we are created to be.*

*A sermon on Joy does not diminish these challenges by focusing on silver linings; in fact, it should give full credit to what we and others face. Ultimately, Joy is trust in the God of transformation by love.*

### Carol

“There Was a Child in Galilee (Dreaming Mary)” (MV 134)

*Not only does this hymn reinforce the continuity between Mary’s faithful love and that of Jesus, but it also continues where the gospel lesson ended, with an encapsulation of the Magnificat (Luke 1:46‒55).*

## Responding and Going Out in God’s World

### Community at Prayer

God of Hope, you hear our silent prayers and urgent cries.  
Hear us now as we pray for your world and its people.  
**God of Hope, hear our prayer**.

God of Peace, on this day we pray  
 for the people of Bethlehem, of Israel and Palestine;   
 for (*other places suffering conflict*);  
 for refugees who have nowhere to lay their heads;   
 and for those who feel alone, lost, tired and frightened.

We pray for those who suffer at the hands of systemic racism, bigotry and misogyny.   
Restore us in right relationship, we who are created in your image, which is plural and good.

We pray for those who live your peace with justice and who, by example and at risk to themselves, shine a light on the chasms that divide us.

Grant your people strength and patience as, together, we seek your promise of life renewed.  
God of the morning star, guide us in the ways of mercy and justice.  
**God of Peace, hear our prayer.**

God of Joy, on this day we pray  
 for those who will spend this day alone;  
 for those whose tables will have an empty place this year;  
 for those in care home and hospital;  
 and for our loved ones who live now in your eternal joy.

We pray also for those working in hospitals and research facilities  
who, daily, work to keep us safe in the midst of the COVID pandemic.

Grant your people courage and wisdom, as we seek your promise of wholeness.  
God of heaven and earth, of anticipation and promise, be with us and heal us.  
**God of Joy, hear our prayer.**

God of Love, open our hearts, that we might receive you and hear your voice.  
Open us to the possibility of true change, in us and in others.  
Remind us of your promise, made again to every generation, of your enduring love.  
May things on earth be as they are in heaven.  
**God of Love, hear our prayer.**

We pray these things in the name of the One who comes, Jesus Christ, who taught us when we pray to say, **Our Father and Mother...** Amen.

### Carol

“Down to Earth, as a Dove” (VU 42)

*This tune may not be familiar to some congregations. However, it lends itself well to adding percussion, other instruments, and even actions. Alternatives include: “There’s a Star in the East” (VU 70), which anticipates the shepherds’ stable discovery, and “The Virgin Mary Had a Baby Boy” (VU 73), which tells the Nativity story and has the advantage of being a lot of fun!*

### Commissioning and Benediction

God’s Joy is surprising, arriving as a messenger.  
God’s Joy is deep and abiding, gathering us across divides.   
Let us seek God’s Joy in all whom we meet.

May God who is Giver, Gift, and Grace-Among-Us,   
be with you today and always. Amen.

1. Productions shared online should give credit to the author, Rev. Andy O’Neill. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)