# Making Space for the Grace of Jesus: A Christmas Eve Service

Prepared by Rev. Dr. Lisa Waites for Advent Unwrapped 2024



Proper 1C—the Nativity of the Lord

Musical Prelude[[1]](#footnote-1)

Words of Welcome and the Life of the Church

Welcome to [insert name] United Church, and to our community Christmas Eve service. My name is [insert name and ministry role] and I am delighted that you’re here today/tonight. Whether you are a regular part of our congregation, or you are in town visiting family and friends for the holidays, or if you’re not entirely sure why you are here at all, except that you felt some mysterious sense of wanting to be in church somewhere (or, less mysteriously, a family member or friend invited you, or maybe dragged you here)—whatever your reason, we are truly glad that you decided to join us.

A few brief announcements to help everyone feel comfortable this evening. [Talk about accessibility options, location of washrooms, low sensory stimuli/quiet space, visual and auditory accommodations, etc.]

If you are parent with young (or not so young) children here tonight, please, RELAX. Sometimes, parents, grandparents, and caregivers imagine that kids are expected to be silent in church. I’m not really sure where that idea came from, but it’s not our expectation here! We know that tonight, of all nights, your kids are likely vibrating with excitement about a certain midnight visitor, whom the church knows as St. Nicholas. I can guess that getting your family here was no small feat! Thank you for making that effort. Well done!

We’ve put out some Christmas colouring sheets, markers, and crayons on the table at the back of the sanctuary for you, and your kids are welcome to bring them right into the pews with them. Their completed masterpiece can go home with you. Or, if your child is willing to share, we’d be glad to add their creative work to our art wall here at the church, or bring them to a person living at [local long-term care home or hospice].

We have replaced our paper bulletins with a digital version, as you may have already noticed. All the information you’ll need to follow along will be up on the screen. When you see an asterisk, that means we’ll be inviting you to stand, if you are able to comfortably do so, but if you’d prefer to stay seated, that’s also fine. If in doubt, follow what the people around you are doing…unless they also look a bit confused, in which case, share a laugh with them, and then try again, together!

Call to Worship/Opening Prayer (Responsive)

“This Christmas Eve, We Gather”[[2]](#footnote-2)

One: Holy One, this Christmas Eve, we gather to celebrate your power displayed in weakness. Tonight, we find the clearest expression of your hope embodied by a vulnerable infant, your peace in the poverty of a rough stable, your joy in the midst of oppression, and your gracious love in a world overflowing with violence.

**Many: We gather in gratitude, and we embrace your uncorruptible power, choosing to live as your disciples by leaning into the daring justice of your hope, your peace, your joy, and your love.**

One: We gather to celebrate the birth of God-with-us, the One who shows us a new way, opens a new understanding, invites us into a new realm.

**Many: We gather in gratitude, and we embrace your example with joy. We gladly open ourselves to new ways of being, and we will answer your gracious invitation by daily choosing to live with gospel intention, for your kingdom [kin-dom/peaceful] purposes, bringing your realm of wholeness and harmony to our neighbours and the nations!**

One: We gather to celebrate the birth of Jesus, the Teacher, who claimed that Love was the greatest commandment, and who taught us that God’s Love was for everyone.

**Many: We gather in gratitude, and we make space for the grace of loving God, loving ourselves, loving our neighbours, and also, loving our enemies.**

One: We gather to celebrate the birth of Jesus, the Healer, who gave dignity to hurting people and showed compassion to those who suffer; Jesus removed the stigma and shame surrounding mental and physical illnesses, restoring relationships and setting the lonely in families again.

**Many: We gather in gratitude, committed to respecting all people, listening to stories of heartache and hurt, treating all people with dignity, and widening the welcome we extend as members of your body, the “Capital C” Church.**

One: We gather to celebrate the birth of Jesus, the Prophet, who raged against the mistreatment of the last and the lost; Jesus lifts up those deemed the “least and the lowest” by the privileged, healthy-and-wealthy ones. Jesus sent the rich away, empty-handed, because they were already too full of themselves to make space for the grace of anything, or anyone else.

**Many: Loving God, we gather in gratitude, embracing your vision of global justice, a world where the needs of all peoples are met. Jesus, as we celebrate your birth, empower us to participate more deeply in the realization of God’s peaceful realm. Holy Spirit, move in and through us, we pray, so that we may live more faithfully and steward more wisely our small corner of creation. On this most special of nights, we sense your presence among us as Emmanuel, God-with-us; encourage us and strengthen our faith as we, your people, join our hearts together and lift up our voices in praise. Amen.**

\*Opening Hymn

“O Come, All Ye Faithful”, VU 60, vs. 1, 3, 5

Advent Wreath Candle-Lighting Liturgy: (Responsive)

A: As we light the candles of hope, peace, joy, and love tonight,

**B: we reflect on these good gifts from God, of God, for us.** *(Pause while first four candles are lit)*

A: And now, as we light the Christ candle in the center of our Advent wreath,

**B: we’re making space for the grace of Jesus!** *(The Christ Candle is lit).*

A: We remember the Advent journey we have taken,

**B: preparing, anticipating, and now celebrating the birth of the Christ Child.**

A: Tonight, our long Advent journey has been fulfilled.

**Many: Jesus has been born, sent by God to show us illuminating grace.**

\*Advent Wreath-Lighting Hymn

“As We Light This Candle” © Lisa Waites, 2024[[3]](#footnote-3)

A Christmas Poem

“What I Want for Christmas” by Anne Weems[[4]](#footnote-4)

An Optional Christmas Music Video: [Peace On Earth](https://youtu.be/q3fiJFCCqMg) as recorded by Casting Crowns[[5]](#footnote-5)

Reader #1: Isaiah 9:6–7

For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from now on and forever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this.

\*Hymn

VU#1 “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” vs. 1, 3, 5, 7

A Liturgical Poem

“O Emmanuel” by Malcolm Guite[[6]](#footnote-6)

Reader #2: Luke 2:1-4

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David.

Hymn

VU#64 “O Little Town of Bethlehem” vs 1, 3, 4

Reader #3 Luke 2:5–7

Joseph went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

Special Music (live performance or YouTube Video): “Angels from the Realms of Glory” ([small ensemble](https://youtu.be/VyyxSoKGjmo)) or ([choral version](https://youtu.be/46TPMREwauA))

Reader #4: Luke 2: 8–12

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.”

\*Hymn

VU#75 “While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks” vs 1–4

Reader #5: Luke 2:13–16

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!” When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger.

A Nativity Video

[Christmas According to Kids](https://youtu.be/suowe2czxcA)[[7]](#footnote-7)

Reader #6: Luke 2:17–20

When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

\*Hymn

VU #59 “Joy to the World” vs 1, 2, and 4

A Christmas Eve Story

*Refuge* by Anne Booth and Sam Usher (New York, NY: Hachette Book Group, 2015): I sought and received permission from the publisher to scan and project the illustrations so that the congregation could see them while the story was read aloud. This nativity story is told by the donkey who carries Mary to Bethlehem, and, later on, helps the family to flee to Egypt. This book works well for Christmas Eve readings, but it also can be powerfully paired with the “Slaughter of the Innocents” or “Flight to Egypt” passages during the Christmas season.

*Song of the Stars: A Christmas* *Story*written by Sally Lloyd-Jones and illustrated by Alison Jay (Grand Rapids, MI: Zonderkidz, 2011). This book conveys the wonder and the excitement of the nativity story from the perspectives of creatures from the forests and the fields, the seas and the skies, all proclaiming the good news. The illustrations are lovely, although Jesus, Mary, and Joseph all appear as Caucasians, which isn’t historically accurate. I appreciated that Lloyd-Jones widened her approach to the story so that the whole universe was anticipating the birth of Christ, and every aspect of creation demonstrates wonder and conveys excitement, not just the people.

A Christmas Eve Blessing/Poem

“For Christmas Eve” by Kate Bowler[[8]](#footnote-8) **or** “The Risk of Birth” by Madeleine L’Engle.[[9]](#footnote-9)

A Christmas Eve Musical Offering

“[Halleluiah – A Christmas Song](https://youtu.be/06QUPNxkiTI)” © Lisa Waites, 2021[[10]](#footnote-10)

Invitation to the Offering

\*Offertory Musical Response

VU#55 “In the Bleak Midwinter” vs 4[[11]](#footnote-11)

Offertory Prayer (Unison)

God of every good and perfect gift, we thank you for the gift of Emmanuel, God-with-us! Please receive and multiply these gifts, which we gladly offer for your kingdom purposes. Use them to meet the needs of this congregation, to alleviate the practical pressures in our local communities, and to bring your good news of great joy to all peoples. Amen.

Congregational Candle-Lighting

We will light our candles, pew by pew, from the Christ candle, with the assistance of the ushers. Electronic tea lights are available for anyone present who would prefer not to handle wax/an open flame, and we also have plenty of real candles available for those who prefer them. If you didn’t pick up a candle or an electric tea light on your way into the sanctuary tonight, just raise your hand now, and an usher will happily bring them to your pew. We will be dimming the sanctuary lights momentarily, but there will still be enough light for safety purposes.

\*Hymn

VU#67 “Silent Night, Holy Night”

Closing Prayer (Responsive)

One: Eternal God, from the vastness and glory of heaven to the poverty of a stable, the radiant light of God-with-us shines from the face of an infant, wrapped in rags and lying in a manger.

**Many: Your incomparable gift of Love is far beyond our human knowledge, but we can receive your Son with joy and wonder, marveling at the mystery of the incarnation. Make space for your grace in us tonight, we pray!**

One: Help us to receive your incredible Love again, so that Jesus may be born in us, and us in him, this very night.

**Many: Send us, as embodied messengers of your gospel, going, telling, and living the good news of Jesus, on the mountains and in the valleys.**

One: Wherever you send us, whatever your call may be, however long or short our years of service, we worship and we work for your glory, and for the healing of this world that you so deeply love, and are working in and through us to restore.

**Many: Amen!**

\*Sending Hymn

VU#43 “Go, Tell It on the Mountain”

\*Blessing and Sending (Responsive)

One: Go, tell it to the neighbours and to the nations!

**Many: Tell the good news to everyone! Jesus Christ is born!**

One: Go, live it in the mountains and the valleys, in the big cities and the tiny hamlets!

**Many: Live the good news, that Jesus Christ is born!**

One: Go, in the abundant, embodied, inclusive love of God-with-us;

**Many: Share the good news, that Jesus Christ is born!**

\*Sung Choral Amen

“As We Leave” © Lisa Waites, 2021[[12]](#footnote-12)

All: As we leave, we hold your Word,

 God-with-us, what joy we’ve heard![[13]](#footnote-13)

 We celebrate your birth this night;

 Live in us, and shine your light!

Musical Postlude[[14]](#footnote-14)

1. A live musical prelude could feature the church pianist or organist or worship team. A high school/university student could play some Christmas carols on a guitar. Chris Tomlin’s CD *Glory in the Highest*, (2009) Carolyn Arends’ *Christmas: The Story of Stories* album (2015), or Keith and Kristyn Getty’s Irish album *Joy to the World* (2011) are all appropriately festive, upbeat, yet worshipful choices for a pre-recorded Christmas Eve prelude/postlude. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Written by Amanda Udis-Kessler, 2024 (adapted by Lisa Waites, 2024 with the author’s permission; amanda@amandaudiskessler.com) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. It is appropriate to sing all five verses of this Candle-Lighting hymn on Christmas Eve. You could divide up the verses, singing 1 and 2 before the candles are lit, and 3–5 afterwards, or four verses as the first four candles are lit, and the last verse after the Christ Candle. The musical score is available on united-church.ca/worship-theme/advent-unwrapped, and permission has been given for non-commercial use during December 2024. Please do report all use of the hymn to OneLicense. For ongoing/other use of this music in 2025 and beyond, please contact lisa.waites1@gmail.com [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. “What I Want for Christmas” by Anne Weems, *From Advent’s Alleluia to Easter Morning Light: Poetry for Worship, Study, and Devotion* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 36–38. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The lyrics for “I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day” were written as a poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1863) and set to music by John Baptiste Calkin in 1872. The version in the video was released by Casting Crowns in 2008, with Longfellow’s lyrics set in a fresh musical arrangement by Ed Rex. “I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day” lyrics © Boosey and Hawkes Music Publishing Ltd., Banahama Tunes, St. Nicholas Music Inc., Calougie Music, Shustmusic Llc, Be Essential Songs, Word Music, Curb Word Music. Posted to Youtube by @kovanecky, accessed on September 28, 2024. This “Lessons and Carols” service does not have a formal sermon time; the “special music,” videos, and Children’s Story replace that sermon time, along with the liturgical poetry and festive blessings. This service can be adapted to suit your congregation. When choosing readers and liturgical helpers for the Advent wreath candle lighting, ushers, etc., please try to include young children, youth, young adults, families, seniors, and elders; think about genders, different cultural and racial identities, as people living with disabilities to take on active leadership roles in the service. As we speak about “making space for the grace of Jesus,” let’s try to embody that gracious approach by how we live and lead the liturgy, together. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Malcolm Guite, “O Emmanuel” in *Sounding the Seasons: Seventy Sonnets for the Christian Year* (London, U.K: Canterbury Press, 2012), 13.  [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This charming video is from the Children’s Ministry at Southland Christian Church. If you don’t have video capacity in your sanctuary (or you don’t want to show a video at your Christmas Eve service), you could easily substitute a congregational hymn or a choral anthem. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. From *The Lives We Actually Have: 100 Blessings for Imperfect Days* by Kate Bowler and Jessica Richie (New York, NY: Convergent Press, 2023) 222–223. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. From *The Ordering of Love: New and Collected Poems of Madeleine L’Engle.* Edited by Sarah Arthur (New York, NY: Convergent Books, 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. You are welcome to play the YouTube version of this hymn (in either video or audio only formats) as the offering is being collected, or to print off the lyrics from the YouTube site and have the congregation join Lisa by singing along with these simple words. The video run time is 3:15. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The lyrics for this hymn were written by Christina Georgina Rossetti in 1872, so they are in the public domain. When I lead this hymn, I typically change masculine references such as “him” to the more inclusive term “God,” so that the first line would accordingly be sung as “What can I give God, poor as I am?” and the final line would be sung “what I can, I give God, give my heart.” I also change the third line slightly, from “if I were a *wise man*, I would do my part” to “if I were a *wise one*, I would do my part” so that all people present are included. These may seem like changes that are too small to make a meaningful difference, but I believe that, just as anti-ableist lyrics need to be chosen with intention and care by worship leaders, so too do anti-racist and anti-sexist lyrics matter; being intentional about our linguistic liturgical choices can help to make inclusive lyrics and prayers the norm in our United Church of Canada orders of worship, with time and consistent effort. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Please use the “Christmas Eve” lyrics for the Choral Amen (printed at the bottom of the score); you have permission to sing this piece throughout December 2024 in non-commercial United Church of Canada worship settings, but please do report each instance to OneLicense. For ongoing/other uses of “As We Leave,” you must secure permission in advance by emailing lisa.waites1@gmail.com [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. If you would prefer not to use any words with sensory connotations, you may omit the lyric “heard” and replace it with “learned” at the end of the second line. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. A live musical postlude would be preferable. If your budget does not allow for a live accompanist, then Chris Tomlin’s CD *Glory in the Highest*, (2009) Carolyn Arends’ *Christmas: the Story of Stories* album (2015), or Keith and Kristyn Getty’s Irish album *Joy to the World* (2011) are all appropriately festive, upbeat, yet worshipful choices for a pre-recorded Christmas Eve postlude. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)