

WEEKLY SERVICES



ADVENT TO EPIPHANY AND THE SEASON AFTER EPIPHANY

SEASON OF ADVENT

Dates: Advent is the beginning of the church year for most churches in the Western tradition. It begins on the fourth Sunday before Christmas Day, which is sometimes the last Sunday in November, and ends on Christmas Eve at sundown. Sometimes the fourth Sunday of Advent is Christmas Eve.

Feast Days* and Special Days

December 3 – International Day of Persons with Disabilities

***December 6** – St. Nicholas’ Day provides a good antidote to the commercial Santa Claus.

December 6 – National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence against Women (Canada)

Meaning of Name

The term *Advent* comes via Old English from the Latin *adventus* (“arrival”). It is a combination of *ad* (to) + *venire* (come). In Advent, we are anticipating the arrival of the baby Jesus as well as the Second Coming of Christ.

Liturgical Colour: Blue

Blue is used within most United Churches for Advent, though some continue with the older practice of using purple. Blue was adopted to symbolize hope and replace the penitential purple, associated with Lent.

SEASON OF CHRISTMAS

Dates: Christmas Day is fixed on December 25 and begins the Christmas season, which runs through January 5.

Meaning of Name

The word *Christmas* comes from Old English *Cristes mæsse* or “Christ’s mass,” referring to the worship service in celebration of Christ’s birth.

Liturgical Colours: White and Gold

White, which is all colours of light combined, traditionally symbolizes goodness, innocence, and God’s faithfulness. Gold reflects glory, triumph, wealth, richness, and extravagance.

Together, they symbolize the light of dawn and are colours of celebration.

SEASON OF EPIPHANY

Dates: January 6 through to Shrove Tuesday. The length of the season of Epiphany varies, based on the beginning of Lent.

Feast Days* and Special Days

***January 6** – Epiphany, also celebrated as Christmas Eve for Orthodox Christians.

***Baptism of Jesus** – the Sunday after the day of Epiphany.

January 18–25 – Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

***Transfiguration** – This feast comes from the Eastern churches, who celebrate it on August 6. It became part of the Western calendar in about the ninth century and was universally celebrated by the fifteenth century. In some Western denominations, the date was moved to the last Sunday before Lent.

***Shrove Tuesday** – the day before Ash Wednesday, on which pancakes are traditionally served. *Shrove* comes from the word *shriven* or “to confess.” The practice of making pancakes was meant to use up rich foods in the house, such as fats and sugars, to prepare for Lenten fasting.

Meaning of Name:

The word *epiphany* means a sudden insight or new understanding. It comes from the Greek word *epiphainein* meaning “to reveal” or “to be manifest.”

Liturgical Colours: White and Gold; Green

White and gold are used for Epiphany and Baptism of Jesus Sunday. Green is for the rest of the season. Green is a cool colour, evoking nature, growth, vitality, freshness, harmony, endurance, and fertility. It is associated with healing and rest. It is the depth and stability of blue combined with the warmth and joy of yellow.

November 30 – Advent 1

Worship materials for Advent were contributed by Matthew Emery, Cloverdale U.C., Surrey, B.C.

Isaiah 2:1–5

Swords into ploughshares.

Psalm 122 (VU p. 845)

With joy to God's house.

Romans 13:11–14

Wake up! The day is near.

Matthew 24:36–44

No one knows the hour.

Creation Connection

Paul admonishes us to throw off the shadowy works of night and wake up, putting on the armour of light. While not on Paul's list, might we need to wake up from our behaviours of wastefulness and environmental damage? Might they be not just poor choices, but actually the works of evil we're called to throw off?

Spark

With all of the references to times, days, and hours in Romans and Matthew, you might decorate the worship space with a variety of clocks: different types displaying different times. Or consider interrupting the worship or sermon time by an alarm clock.

Editor's Note: In the reading from Romans 13:11–14, substitute “works of darkness” with “works of night” or “shadowy works of night,” to avoid the embedded racism.

With Children

Advent has long been talked about as a time of “waiting,” especially with children. Most children—and most adults, to be honest—associate Advent with “waiting for Christmas” rather than our present waiting for Christ's coming again. But how can we be “waiting” for something that has already happened (the birth of Jesus)? So, this Advent, consider avoiding the language of waiting and instead focus on preparation—getting ready. With this week's readings from Romans and Matthew, the natural focus would be on getting ready by way of being alert. Ask the children what they do to make sure they don't miss something. How can we be alert to what God is doing in the world?

Sermon Starter

Life is “a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing,” says Shakespeare's Macbeth.

Today, we lament the information overload pushed at us, akin to drinking from a firehose, wonder whether any of it is actually important, and may choose to “unplug” as self-care. And yet, here we are at the beginning of the season that cries out to us: “Be on alert!” Paul calls to us to “wake from sleep.” And so, too, does Jesus: “Keep awake therefore...you also must be ready.” Unlike a social media feed, though, these calls should not lead us to numbed apathy or to hyper-charged anxiety. Apathy leads us to believe that this world in its current state is all that life has in store. Anxiety unleashes the fear that existence is out to get us, each sign from the heavens charged with the portents of doom. The call, though, is not to be anxious or apathetic, but to be alert to what God is up to. In truth, we *do* know something about what is to come, about the coming reality God is already bringing about. We know the story, and as ones who know the story, we have a sense of “what time it is.”

Hymns

VU 31	“O Lord, how shall I meet you”
VU 34	“Come now, O God of peace”
VU 336	“Christ whose glory fills the skies”
VU 507	“Today we all are called to be disciples”
VU 677	“O God of every nation”
VU 682	“O day of peace”
VU 708	“My Lord, what a morning”
MV 4	“All who are thirsty” (<i>particularly if celebrating communion</i>)
MV 19	“Maranatha”
TLUS* 55	“We light this candle”

On hymnary.org:

“Awake! Awake, and greet the new morn” by Marty Haugen

“Down by the riverside” traditional African American spiritual

“Rejoice, rejoice believers,” by Laurentius Laurenti; trans. S.L. Findlater; tune:

LLANGLOFFAN or HAF TRONES LAMPA FÄRDIG

**Then Let Us Sing!*

December 7 – Advent 2

Isaiah 11:1–10

The peaceable reign of God.

Psalms 72:1–7, 18–19 (VU p. 790, Part One and Three)

A just ruler.

Romans 15:4–13

The root of Jesse and hope of Gentiles.

Matthew 3:1–12

John the Baptist preaches.

Creation Connection

“A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,” the prophet proclaims. Pay attention to what is around you in creation, and whenever you notice a sprig of life emerging, in any season, from what seems dead, remember the gospel news: Christ is coming!

Spark

The so-called peaceable kingdom portion of the Isaiah passage has been depicted in art many times, most famously by Edward Hicks’s early 1800s paintings of the same name, but by many others, too. Search *peaceable* or *Isaiah 11:1–10* on the Vanderbilt University Divinity Library’s Art in the Christian Tradition website and use some of these art pieces for projection or other display.



With Children

John the Baptist is a fascinating character for children, and Matthew’s version of the John the Baptist scene (like Mark’s) includes the bits about his clothing and diet—camel hair, locusts, and wild honey—that especially intrigue. Play it up! Do you have someone who could do a bit of play-acting of John? Picking up on last week’s theme of being alert and paying attention, how did John the Baptist alert people to what God was doing?

Sermon Starter

Jesus came to invite us to prepare the way for God’s dream, a way that ultimately must begin within our own selves, our hearts and minds, our practices and ways of being in the world, our impulses, inclinations, and intuitions. That’s part of why we observe this season of preparation, through confession and receiving of John the Baptist’s call to repent, to change our hearts and lives. After all, most of us are really good at confessing the sins of *others*: “They.” “Those people.” But if there’s anything that modern psychology and family-systems therapy can teach us, it’s that we don’t have any control over what “they” think or do. The place we begin preparing the way is within ourselves, in our own internal monologues, and by practising generosity in our assumptions about others and cultivating peace in our own impulses. We don’t do this on our own, of course—God’s spirit works within us always. When we take on this work of joining with the Spirit as it seeks to prepare with us the way within, we will find that we are being blessed in order to be a blessing, saved not *from* others but *for* others.

Hymns

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| VU 2 | “Come, thou long-expected Jesus” |
| VU 8 | “Lo, how a rose e’er blooming” |
| VU 10 | “Prepare the way of the Lord” |
| VU 18 | “There’s a voice in the wilderness” |
| VU 20 | “On Jordan’s bank” |
| VU 28 | “Herald! Sound the note of gladness” |
| VU 680 | “Isaiah the prophet has written of old” |
| VU 697 | “O for a world” |
| VU p. 882 | “Prepare the way” |
| MV 4 | “All who are thirsty” (<i>particularly if celebrating communion</i>) |
| MV 24 | “Breath of God, Breath of peace” |
| TLUS* 57 | “We wait for God” |

On hymnary.org:

“Wild and lone the prophet’s voice” by Carl P. Daw Jr.

**Then Let Us Sing!*

SHARE YOUR COMMENTS AND IDEAS

Contributions to **Gathering** can be submitted through **GatheringWorship.ca** or emailed to gather@united-church.ca.

December 14 – Advent 3

Isaiah 35:1–10

The desert blooms and rejoices.

Psalm 146:5–10 (VU p. 868)

God's reign brings justice.

or **Luke 1:46b–55** (VU pp. 898–899)

Mary's song of justice.

James 5:7–10

Wait patiently for the coming of the Lord.

Matthew 11:2–11

John's disciples visit Jesus.

Creation Connection

"The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad," declares Isaiah. Rejoice, we have the privilege and opportunity to participate in what God is up to whenever we tend to the flourishing of creation!

Spark

This week could be a good week for a "lessons and carols" style service, particularly if you want to craft something a little different from typical Christmas Eve versions. You might offer a truly *Advent* lessons and carols service. The Church of England has multiple patterns for this service in their Common Worship liturgical resources (search *Church of England seasons advent* and choose Carol Services in the Advent Season). Or create your own version that intersperses scriptural readings with poetry and other contemporary voices. The *Journey with Jesus* archive of poetry is a great resource (search *journey with Jesus poetry archive Advent* and select Poetry for Advent).

With Children

By this point in the season, most children will have been thinking about their "wish list" for Christmas. In some sense, both the Isaiah reading and Mary's song in the Luke option for the psalm/canticle selection express something of God's wish list for our world. Talk to the children about what they might put on a wish list for *others*, or perhaps their wish list (or God's) for the wider world. Invite them to dream—even for just a moment—about wishes for others in the midst of a season that often focuses on our hopes for ourselves.

Sermon Starter

It's a wonderful vision and promise of joy we

receive from Isaiah this week, and yet it's one that seems so out of place: out of place in the middle of all the dire warnings Isaiah proclaimed in the preceding 34 chapters and against all the mounting evidence of what was in store for Isaiah's people. This vision and promise of joy might even seem out of place for us today. Flowing streams and blossoming deserts sound far-fetched in the face of the climate catastrophe. The people of God being safe from ravenous beasts seems like a lofty dream against the news headlines. Even the promise of joy might feel unreachable amid health challenges, tight finances, or family tensions. But perhaps the whole point of the proclamation is, in fact, how out of place it all seems. Perhaps we are being invited to recognize the truth that, even in the "out of place" places, God is still with us and is still coming to embrace, restore, and save. Walter Brueggemann comments that this passage "invites us out of our managed rationality to affirm that God does what the world thinks is not possible" (*Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV—Year A* [Westminster John Knox, 1995, p. 21]). That is the deeper joy that Jesus brings. Sure, we rightly wonder when the world is going to turn. But in the meantime, the world is already turning.

Hymns

VU 2 "Come, thou long-expected Jesus"

VU 9 "People, look east"

VU 23 "Joy shall come"

VU 44 "It came upon the midnight clear"

VU 652 "Be still, my soul"

VU p. 881 "In the desert"

VU p. 883 "Comfort, comfort now my people"

MV 20 "God of still waiting"

MV 146 "The kingdom of God"

"The Giver" by Mia Michelle McClain

(GatheringWorship.ca)

On *hymnary.org*:

"Awake! Awake, and greet the new morn" by Marty Haugen

"Lift up your heads, ye mighty gates" Georg Weissel; trans. Catherine Winkworth

Settings of Luke 1:46b–55

VU p. 899 "My soul gives glory to my God"

MV 120 "My soul cries out (Canticle of the Turning)"

December 21 – Advent 4

Isaiah 7:10–16

The sign of Emmanuel.

Psalms 80:1–7, 17–19 (VU p. 794, Part One)

Shine forth and save us.

Romans 1:1–7

Paul states his authority and belief.

Matthew 1:18–25

Joseph's dream.

Creation Connection

"Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved" (Psalm 80:7). This is not only *our* prayer; it is the deep groaning of all creation.

Spark

The Isaiah and Matthew passages for this week both highlight a young woman bearing a child as a sign of God's activity in the world. Does your community of faith engage in any service, charity, or justice ministry focused on at-risk women, youth, and children? Include a hands-on way of engaging with that ministry this week.

With Children

With this week's Matthew passage, we come to the one time in our three-year cycle that we are told anything much about Joseph. Have an interactive conversation about who's a part of the Christmas story, using a nativity set or other depiction featuring unexpected characters. A great option is *The Birth of Jesus Advent Calendar and Nativity Scene*, by Agostino Traini (Beaming Books, 2019). Traini's scene includes the usual suspects, but also people bringing animals, blankets, coffee, even a pizza! Keep the pieces hidden and ask the children to call out who's in the story. Then place them into the scene. When the answers are drying up, say that still others have a place in the story, too, and start bringing out the remaining characters. The point is this: If the story isn't complete without those characters, maybe it isn't complete without us, either! For a video of this activity, visit <https://youtu.be/oxCtLnIUYY>.

Sermon Starter

We are now coming very close to Christmas. All around us, it seems everyone is doing all they can to make things somehow "special." After all, we are preparing to celebrate something deeply profound and world changing. On the other hand, trying to make everything somehow "special" and extra-profound and super-shiny-and-wonderful is, in a way, exactly the opposite of the truth we celebrate at Christmas. In the passage from Isaiah, the prophet has been sent to Ahaz with a simple word, a simple call: to trust. If Ahaz will trust in God's promise and rely on God's protection, then he will be established and the kingdom will be preserved. Isaiah even offers the opportunity to ask for a sign—some miracle of proof, if you will. Ahaz turns it down, but Isaiah declares that there will be a sign anyway. Notice just where that sign is. It is not in the heights of heaven nor in the depths of Sheol. It comes right *here*, in *this* realm of existence, in this ordinary place of life. It's not a light show in the sky or a rumbling of the deep; it is a woman and a child, on the next block or perhaps in the next room. How ordinary! How *this-worldly*! How *un-special*! And yet...how Godlike, at least if you're thinking about the God who comes to us in Jesus Christ.

Hymns

VU 1	"O come, O come, Emmanuel"
VU 5	"All earth is waiting"
VU 8	"Lo, how a rose e'er blooming"
VU 17	"O ancient love"
VU 29	"Hark the glad sound"
VU 44	"It came upon the midnight clear"
VU 61	"Of the Father's love begotten"
VU 62	"Once in royal David's city"
MV 33	"Jesus came bringing us hope"
"Gentle Joseph, Joseph dear" a 15th-century German carol (hymnary.org)	



December 24 – Christmas Eve

Worship materials for Christmas Eve to New Year's Day were contributed by David Robertson, while at High River U.C., High River, Alta.

Isaiah 9:2–7

A child has been born for us.

Psalms 96 (VU p. 816)

Sing to God a new song.

Titus 2:11–14

Live a godly, upright life.

Luke 2:1–14 (15–20)

Jesus' birth.

Creation Connection

For those who live in the northern hemisphere, the Christmas season is celebrated near the shortest day and longest night of the year, the winter solstice. In the fourth century, when the date for Christmas was set near the solstice, the decision-makers were aware of the cosmic light and the theological significance of celebrating the birth of Jesus as the light of the world, wisdom of the universe. How do we link our celebrations with creation and the cosmos?

Spark

Did you know that when electric lights became widely available, it was debated among some church folk whether churches should have them? There was a sense that moving away from natural light, candlelight, lanterns, and coal-oil lamps would change the nature of worship. Full-on bright light changes the nature of the worship space even as it makes it easier to read. Imagine what worship was like when there were no electric lights. Is this why turning off the bright lights and lighting candles on Christmas Eve is a cherished practice?



With Children

On cue, have the lights in the sanctuary turned off. Where did the light go? Then, have the lights turned back on. Where did the darkness go? Did you know that dark and light like to play hide-and-seek? They are friends. They work together. Later in this service, we will turn the lights off (or down low) again and light our Christmas Eve candles. In this special worship service, we can have both of these friends, dark and light, join us. With the dark holding the space, our candles burn brightly. It is a moment of wonder as we are embraced by the two friends: dark and light. We can't have one without the other. They work as a team. Did you know that one of the names we give Jesus is "Light of the World"? Jesus, like this candlelight, brings light and warmth to us. He helps us, loves us, and cares for us. Jesus is our friend and teammate, just like light and dark are friends and teammates and work together to make growth and rest possible.

Sermon Starter

In Latin America, the Spanish phrase for giving birth is *dar a luz*, which literally means "to give a light." Isaiah mentions darkness, great light, and birth in Chapter 9. Luke 2:6–7 narrates the birth of Jesus and how Mary laid her first-born in a manger. This night, this Christmas Eve, we are celebrating light given on a cosmic, divine scale made incarnate in a wee baby. Such is the wonder of this night—how the divine light of the glorious heavens collides with the humble light of human birth. It sparks the song of angels, releases joy-filled refrains of blessing (Psalm 96), and proclaims peace on earth. A light is given. And no shadow, no evil, can ever overcome it.

Hymns

- VU 45 "Joy is now in every place"
- VU 57 "Oh, how joyfully"
- VU 59 "Joy to the world"
- VU 64 "O little town of Bethlehem"
- VU 67 "Silent night, holy night"
- VU 69 "Away in a manger"
- TLUS* 92 "The darkness comes"

and other favourite Christmas carols

**Then Let Us Sing!*

December 25 – Christmas Day

Isaiah 62:6–12

Prepare the way for the people.

Psalm 97 (VU p. 817)

Let the earth be glad!

Titus 3:4–7

Saved by grace; heirs of hope.

Luke 2: (1–7) 8–20

Shepherds and angels.

Creation Connection

The earth has turned, and morning has come. The dawn breaks. The night of labour and delivery is over. Christ is born. How will you greet the dawn of this new day?

Spark

If people are taking the time to come to worship today, how can it be a place of rest for those who have been busy preparing for the festivities, a place of connection for those who are feeling alone, and a time for everyone to lean into the wonder of God being born—in Christ, in us, in all creation?

With Children

I wonder.... Have you ever held or been with a newborn baby? Their skin is so soft and smooth, and if you smell their skin, there is a sweetness to it. Today I am thinking about Mary and Joseph holding their newborn baby. I wonder.... What do you think that was like for them? I wonder if, after the baby Jesus was born, Joseph and Mary and the baby just wanted to sleep and rest. I wonder.... What do you feel like when you are held in the arms of those who love you? And I wonder if that's not what God's love is like.

Sermon Starter

How do we lean into this mystery? Christmas is such a confusing juxtaposition of commercial gluttony, on the one hand, and the humble quiet mystery of the incarnation on the other hand. What about our intention to peer through the fluff into the heart of the Christmas narrative, which offers us such assurance that God cherishes us and all creation so much that God chooses to be born in human form? That this is how close God desires to be with us—embodied, incarnate, with and in every breath we take. There is deep joy in this knowing. In life, in death, in life beyond death, we are not alone. Emmanuel, God is with us. There is perhaps nothing more comforting than this Christmas joy of knowing that, whether we are young or old, well or achy, hopeful or despairing, God is with us and all around us—being light and love, compassion and healing. This is indeed the mystery of our faith at Christmas.

Hymns

VU 60 “O come, all ye faithful”
 VU 73 “The virgin Mary had a baby boy”
 VU 74 “What child is this”
 VU 75 “While shepherds watched their flocks”
 VU 76 “See amid the winter’s snow”
 MV 40 “Never ending joy”
 MV 158 “Dream a dream”
 “Star-Child” by Shirley Erena Murray
 (hymnary.org)
 and other favourite Christmas carols



December 28 – First after Christmas

Isaiah 63:7–9

God's presence has saved us.

Psalm 148 (VU pp. 870–871)

Let all creation praise God.

Hebrews 2:10–18

Jesus, the pioneer of salvation.

Matthew 2:13–23

The escape to Egypt.

Creation Connection

Why is it that the days following the winter solstice seem shorter even though the light is returning and night receding? Invite people to notice when the daylight starts feeling longer.

Spark

In that time between being asleep and awake, insight comes, and God's ways are often made known. Do you or someone in your congregation have a story to share about insights or messages that have come in a dream or in those moments between asleep and awake?

With Children

God is with us. God has lots of ways of helping us know that. Did you know that for Jesus' dad, Joseph, God came in a dream to help him? God assured Joseph that, no matter what, God was with Joseph and Mary. Amazing. I have learned that God is always searching for ways to help us know we are not alone, especially when things are disrupted and topsy-turvy in our lives. It might be when our routines are put on hold over the holidays or when we feel a bit lonely because we miss our friends from school. God is always finding ways to show us that we are loved. I wonder.... What are some of the ways God helps you know that you are loved and not alone?

Sermon Starter

It's the last Sunday before the new year. It's a liminal space—that is, a time of in-between. It's the time between Christmas and the new year. It's a time between endings and beginnings. In-between times can be interesting, for sure, if not uncomfortably so. The midpoint between sleeping and being awake, which seems to fall around 3:00 a.m., can be a time of dreamscape—of awareness and insight. Joseph dreams. God sends a liminal message of escaping, leaving home, giving up the familiar, and, for safety's sake, living in a foreign land. It is a dream that leads to refuge and shelter in the face of imminent danger. It is a dream that tells of God's ways guiding and leading the journey. As we settle into celebrating the gift of God's light being born during the Christmas season, it is curious that Matthew's story arrives on this day when the winter nights seem deeper even though the winter solstice has passed. And yet, Isaiah's people, Matthew's people, and the writer of Hebrews offer words of profound hope and steadfast love. God is still with us, in liminal moments...providing grace, direction, and salvation.

Hymns

VU 48	"Hark! the herald angels sing"
VU 55	"In the bleak midwinter"
VU 58	"Infant holy, infant lowly"
VU 61	"Of the Father's love begotten"
VU 78	"Sing till sundown"
MV 158	"Dream a dream"
MV 162	"Christ, within us hidden"
MV 182	"Grateful"

Editor's note: Please be aware of how the contrast between light and darkness in passages such as Isaiah 9:2 and Romans 13:12 has been used to promote and support racism. While celebrating the light, be careful not to use darkness as a negative contrast. Often, a word such as *oppression* or *shadows* or *evil* could replace *darkness* in prayers and in the scripture reading.

January 1 – New Year’s Day

Ecclesiastes 3:1–13

For everything there is a season.

Psalms 8 (VU pp. 730–732)

What are humans that God is mindful of them?

Revelation 21:1–6a

A new heaven and a new earth.

Matthew 25:31–46

Judging the sheep and the goats.

Creation Connection

Have you ever peered into the heavens at night and wondered, “What am I that God is mindful of me?” It can be both a scary thought and an amazing thought. What about having a stargazing gathering as a community of faith?

Spark

As the light returns, the days lengthen, and a new year begins, how do you imagine God’s new thing? What might be your new thing? You might invite people to share new things they are going to try or have tried in the past related to their faith journey. How have they sensed God’s presence in the call to the new thing and in the carrying out of the goal?

With Children

I’m curious.... When you think about New Year’s Day, what do you think? What does it mean for you? What do you hope for this year? Is there something new you would like to try? When you think about your friends, or even the whole world, what would you pray for this year? How might you show kindness this year? In the Book of Revelation, God declares the possibility of a new heaven and a new earth. If we were joining God in creating a new earth, what would be important in what we created? (Hint: the parable in Matthew gives us some clues.)

Sermon Starter

Many of us have stayed up late to witness the arrival of the new year. It’s all about endings, beginnings, and imaginings. Perhaps we are pondering the passing of time by marking the years. Or maybe the new year brings with it the mixed feelings of settling into the winter season as the frozen ground sleeps beneath us and we, too, are invited to consider a soulful hibernation of sorts. The readings for today are rich for pondering—the noticing of seasons, the awareness of our place in God’s mindfulness, the imagining of God’s new heaven and new earth, and of course, wonderings about how following the Way of Jesus inspires right relations and justice. Maybe today is a day for fewer words and more silence—to wonder, to ponder, to “be.” Maybe this is what we need more than ever as some of us welcome family and friends for a busy New Year’s gathering and others long for connection and community in their aloneness. How, at the end of the day, can we together, as a community of faith, hold hope in our hearts and offer our best prayers and intentions for the year ahead?

Hymns

VU 34	“Come now, O God of peace”
VU 37	“Gloria”
VU 43	“Go, tell it on the mountain”
VU 82	“A light is gleaming”
VU 87	“I am the light of the world”
VU 600	“When I needed a neighbour”
VU 702	“When a poor one”
VU 713	“I see a new heaven”
MV 84	“In you there is a refuge”
MV 115	“Behold, behold, I make all things new”

Célébrants et célébrantes de culte, veuillez prendre note de ce qui suit.

Lorsque vous utilisez des textes de **Gathering**, nous vous demandons d’inclure la mention suivante:

Texte de _____ .
Gathering, Avent/Noël/Épiphanie 2025/2026,
 page _____. Droit d’utilisation accordé.

January 4 – Second after Christmas

Worship materials for January 4 to January 18 were contributed by Robin King, Ponoka U.C., Ponoka, Alta.

Jeremiah 31:7–14

I will turn mourning into joy.

Psalms 147:12–20 (VU pp. 868–869, Part Two)

God sends God's word to earth.

Ephesians 1:3–14

Destined for adoption as God's children.

John 1:(1–9), 10–18

The Word became flesh; we have seen his glory.

Creation Connection

Living where the “Light of the World” arrives in the midst of the grey cold of winter, we might lose touch with our earth as we bundle up against it. But the Light has been here from the very beginning of creation and continues to create and enliven, even under the blanket of snow.

Spark

It's still Christmas. Keep the decorations up and keep singing Christmas carols, hymns, and songs (there's more than enough). Then incorporate the undecorating into the service, or right after, and involve everyone: Make the “putting away” of Christmas as meaningful as the journey there. Perhaps there are stories to be told about your Christmas decor, stories that might get lost in the preparations and lost to future generations, if not shared.

With Children

Christmas plays or pageants with children are a popular way to engage the Christmas story. If you had one, invite the children to reflect on what it meant to play their character. If you didn't, ask them to imagine being in the story and who they would like to be. That action story comes from Luke and Matthew, but John tells the story of us being in it: that God would become one of us, just like us. That's what's really behind the scenes.

You might also keep up the theme of packing up Christmas, and pack up the nativity set together as you reflect on each of the characters. You might connect this with the Advent 4 With Children, on p. 11.

Sermon Starter

While John gives Jesus a more cosmic beginning than Luke and Matthew, it's still all about being one of us. Not a figure set apart, present but disconnected. One of us. As Eugene Peterson puts it in *The Message*, “the Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood.” For John, this is a new way of understanding our relationship with God. It's not just about “come, let us adore him,” it's about welcoming a new member of the community (Jesus) and getting to know them, engaging them and being open to them engaging us. We're not always good at that. Especially if the new neighbour is not what we expected.

Christmas is the annual reminder that God's here, living next door, just down the street and across town. Don't put that part of Christmas away. Maybe leave out a decoration that reminds us that love is in you and in your neighbour and in everyone you meet.

Hymns

VU 45	“Joy is now in every place”
VU 56	“Jesus, our brother”
VU 69	“Away in a manger”
VU 87	“I am the light of the world”
MV 10	“Come and seek the ways of Wisdom”
MV 37	“Each blade of grass”
MV 83	“Let my spirit always sing”

and any unused Christmas carols as appropriate



January 6 – Epiphany

Isaiah 60:1–6

Arise, shine, for your light has come.

Psalms 72:1–7, 10–14 (VU p. 790, Part One and Two)

God's anointed defends the poor.

Ephesians 3:1–12

Boldness and confidence through faith.

Matthew 2:1–12

The visit of the magi.

Creation Connection

In the 1980s, Carl Sagan said, "We are a way for the cosmos to know itself.... We're made of star-stuff." Find the full quote online and spend time reflecting on the idea that we are made of the very essence of what all creation is made of. We are not separate.

Spark

Put stars everywhere. Find them, collect them, and make them so they're all different shapes and sizes. Have star-shaped name tags or stars ready to hang for everyone to write or draw on as they come in.

With Children

There are more stars than we can possibly count. And they're all different. In Matthew's story, a star is leading the magi to Jesus, a star that no one else seems to have noticed. Who are the stars that guide you? You can be a star, too. That's something Jesus teaches us in his life: how to be stars, showing others the way to be loving and kind.

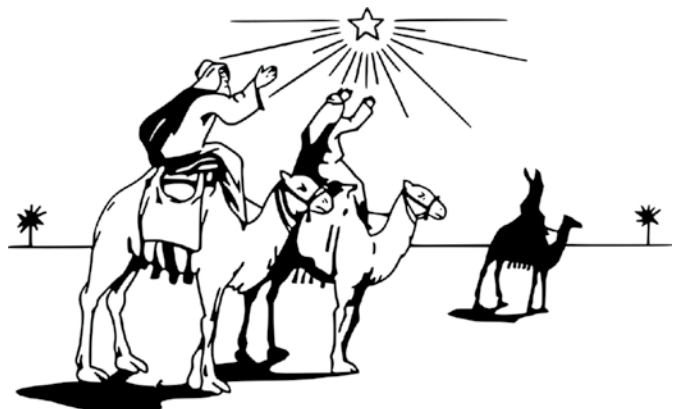
Sermon Starter

As Eugene Peterson puts it in *The Message*, "the Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood." But the magi weren't from the neighbourhood. They were foreigners, and they used astronomy to find Jesus. Matthew doesn't name how many there were or if they were wealthy or how long it took to get there. They were searching for a king and brought appropriate gifts, only to find themselves at the home of poor people with no hint of royalty. The magi raise a lot of questions for us.

And they should, because everything about their story is unexpected: who they are, how they travelled, what they brought, and who they found. To dig into their story is to be open to the unexpected, to wonder at what can be revealed if our hearts and minds are open. That's when epiphanies happen.

Hymns

VU 79	"Arise, your light is come"
VU 82	"A light is gleaming"
VU 87	"I am the light of the world"
VU 96	"Will you come and see the light"
VU 97	"When a Star is shining"
VU 299	"Teach me, God, to wonder"
MV 71	"When the wind of winter blows"
MV 82	"Bathe me in your light"



Worship Leaders

We ask that you include this statement when using material from **Gathering**.

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Gathering, Advent/Christmas/Epiphany 2025/2026,
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January 11 – Baptism of the Lord

Isaiah 42:1–9

God's servant brings justice.

Psalm 29 (VU p. 756)

Ascribe to God all glory and strength.

Acts 10:34–43

Peter's sermon to the Gentiles.

Matthew 3:13–17

Jesus is baptized.

Creation Connection

Find the Keepers of the Water Declaration, Fort Simpson, 2006, which states that “water is a sacred gift, an essential element that sustains and connects all life” and reminds us of the obligation we have to care for the water. How do we connect this declaration with the ritual of baptism and water becoming holy for us in that action?

Spark

Borrow a fountain so the running water can be heard or felt. Or bring the image of water into the service in other ways. For example, create a river with fabric or hang long blue-and-silver ribbons in the doorway for people to enter through. (Be sure they hang low enough to touch everyone as they enter.) If you have tech, project a video of a running river or stream. There are so many creative ways. Then, be sure to incorporate a renewal of baptismal vows in the service and be creative with how the water is shared.

With Children

If there's a baptism today, take the opportunity to reflect with the children about baptism: why we do what we do and what it means for us. Take a moment to connect our baptism with Jesus' baptism. We might not go to a river, but the Spirit is here, too, and we're all beloved children of God. Or, going in a different direction, explore the sacredness of water and briefly share the story of the Keepers of the Water and the Water Walkers and the need to protect and care for our water.

Sermon Starter

It was likely a warm day when Jesus went to the river to be baptized. But it's winter here, so just imagine, for a moment, Jesus trudging through the snow with everyone else, down to the river where John's frantically chopping at the ice, trying to break through. He can't, so he finally gives up and uses snow.... But why couldn't that be a baptism as well?

We baptize with water because water is life. John called people to repent, to turn away from sin and turn back to God. The water symbolically washed away that old life and offered something new, a new life with God.

In the cold and shadows of winter, life hides in the snow. We know that spring will come, that creation will come back to life. We know that life is still there through all the changing seasons. Our lives are like that, too.

That day Jesus was baptized by John, I wonder how many others were baptized who struggled with their repentance. I wonder how many found themselves making their way through different seasons in their lives. I wonder how many remembered their baptism, remembered Jesus, and found their way through because of those memories. What faith memories help us remember that we're all children of God?

Hymns

VU 99	“Christ, when for us you were baptized”
VU 442	“Wash, O God, (y)our sons and daughters”
VU 626	“I heard the voice of Jesus”
VU 644	“I was there to hear your baring cry”
MV 3	“River”
MV 87	“Water flowing from the mountains”
MV 135	“Called by earth and sky”
MV 144	“Like a healing stream”
MV 157	“I am a child of God”
TLUS* 11	“The river is a healer”

**Then Let Us Sing!*

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January 18 – Second after Epiphany

Isaiah 49:1–7

The mission of God's servant.

Psalm 40:1–11 (VU p. 764)

I waited patiently for God.

1 Corinthians 1:1–9

I thank God for you.

John 1:29–42

Simon and Andrew become disciples.

Creation Connection

Our relationships with creation tend to be very one-sided, and what we know about nature is often only what's useful to us. Choosing to be curious, wanting to know more about the living world around us for its own sake, not just our own, is what makes good stewards.

Spark

How the first disciples are “called” is different in John than in the other gospels. Find an old phone (maybe a rotary style) and place it front and centre. At various times during the service, pause and turn to it expectantly, but wait patiently. Keep your cellphone on and have someone call it before the end of the service. You might answer with the old phone and have a conversation with God. Maybe this is how you offer the Prayers of the People. Here are three things: Our call can come from different, even unexpected places; calls come when they come, not always when we're ready; and you have to choose to answer.

With Children

In Isaiah, we're told that we are meant to be a light, showing the way. John the Baptist directs the first followers to Jesus by saying “that's the guy I've been talking about.” We need to be witnesses to God, with words and actions. We don't just point people to Jesus; we bring love, kindness, and good to the world, just like Jesus. With permission from the copyright holder, share *Say Something!* by Peter H. Reynolds (Orchard Books, 2019). It's a great way to highlight that the world needs each of our voices, the unique way that we all share God's love in this world.

Sermon Starter

Dan Damon's classic hymn MV 161 begins “I have called you by your name, you are mine” and sings not just about God's call, but about everything God does to support and love that call into being. But John's tale of how the first followers find Jesus brings us a different way: Who's choosing whom? Here, Jesus offers an invitation to “come and see,” the opportunity to experience for themselves and to choose Jesus. There are many ways to God, and we each travel our own way, sometimes responding to a call, sometimes to an invitation. How do you experience that? Who within the congregation might have personal stories they would share about the call of God?

Hymns

VU 359	“He came singing love”
VU 395	“Come in, come in and sit down”
VU 586	“We shall go out with hope”
VU 595	“We are pilgrims”
VU 598	“When pain of the world”
MV 94	“Love knocks and waits”
MV 142	“Oh a song must rise”
MV 161	“I have called you by your name”
MV 165	“There is a time”
MV 182	“Grateful”

Great News!

Then Let Us SING!

is now searchable on

GatheringWorship.ca.

You will find all the new hymns from TLUS as well as updates to hymns from *Voices United* and *More Voices*. And we will be sharing hymn suggestions from *Then Let Us Sing!* (TLUS) in Gathering.

Take time to explore!

January 25 – Third after Epiphany

Worship materials for January 25 to February 15 were contributed by Ivan Gregan, Dartmouth, N.S.

Isaiah 9:1–4

The people have seen a great light.

Psalm 27:1, 4–9 (VU pp. 753–755)

God is my light and my salvation.

1 Corinthians 1:10–18

Overcome divisions and find unity.

Matthew 4:12–23

Jesus begins his ministry.

Creation Connection

Light comes in many forms. Human eyes can typically only perceive light between 380 and 740 nanometres, with infrared and ultraviolet beyond our capacity to experience. However, infrared and ultraviolet do exist. What lies beyond our present “sight,” beyond our comprehension, beyond our personal experience, and beyond our rational explanations?

Spark

Cartoon characters have light bulbs come on over their heads when they have an idea. Inside the light bulb is revealed what they are thinking at that moment of inspiration. How many “light bulbs” do you imagine popping up over the heads of people during worship? “Lift up your heads!” we are exhorted in the Psalms. What will we discover when we pay attention? Is the universe filled with light? Is the sanctuary a place for illumination? What happens or can happen when we gather together with so much “light” and inspiration around us? Maybe post paper cut-outs of light bulbs around the sanctuary and invite people to write or draw their inspirations.

With Children

With a prism, find a spot where light comes into the sanctuary and help children experience the rainbow of colours present in light. For those who relate to the world through touch, create a rainbow with a different texture representing each colour, so that they, too, experience the diversity. The diversity of colours and textures creates one rainbow. Point to Paul’s encouragement to overcome divisions and find unity.

Did you know that in April 2025, scientists revealed that they had discovered a new colour called “olo,” a deep blue-green? God’s creation is so amazing. We keep discovering new wonders and possibilities.

Sermon Starter

In this time of the year when the nights are still long, the Light of Christ continues shining in the midst of the shadows of night. Isaiah wrote of light shining in a time of tremendous fear. The psalmist writes of God being light and by that light bringing salvation to people caught up in a lack of hope. Even Matthew’s gospel opens with the ominous note of John being arrested and then goes on to refer to Isaiah and the light. Can God be present in deep shadows of danger, fear, and despair? Of course! How has God been present in these times? Why does Matthew call us back to the Isaiah reading? Is he trying to remind us of God’s faithfulness? Has God been faithfully present through all time, even as the circumstances changed, and can God continue to be? Does the light of God extend beyond the wavelengths that we are able to experience? In the world today, in our society, through our musicians, our poets, our writers, God continues to present us with wondrous light. Offer some examples of music, poetry, and writing that bring light and hope to your spirit, especially when you are feeling sad or afraid or despairing.

Hymns

Isaiah 9:1–4

VU 79 “Arise, your light is come”

VU 82 “A light is gleaming”

MV 82 “Bathe me in your light”

MV 220 “Hope shines as the solitary star”

Psalm 27

VU p. 753 “Safe in your hands, O God”

MV 17 “God in the darkness”

1 Corinthians 1:10–18

MV 171 “Christ has no body now but yours”

MV 200 “You are my body”

Matthew 4:12–23

VU 288 “Great is thy faithfulness”

VU 651 “Guide me, O thou great [and holy]”

MV 28 “God of the Bible”

MV 48 “I can feel you near me God”

MV 59 “Alleluia, praise to God”

February 1 – Fourth after Epiphany

Micah 6:1–8

What does God require of us?

Psalm 15 (VU p. 736)

Who may be a guest in God's house?

1 Corinthians 1:18–31

God's foolishness better than human wisdom.

Matthew 5:1–12

Blessed are the poor in spirit.

Creation Connection

In the book *The Human Factor* (Fortress Press, 1993), Philip Hefner proposes that we are co-creators with God. Since we profess that God “has created and is creating,” how are we involved?

Spark

Display a basket of knitting supplies. Focus on the idea that we have a part to play in the co-creating of God's creation. Knitting needles and crochet hooks turn yarn into clothing or things of beauty. A ball of yarn and needles or a hook combined with human skill create mittens or blankets or shawls. God provides materials, infuses us with ideas, and, with the wisdom of ages, we create. Bakers and carpenters follow the same pattern. Might some artisans share stories of their inspiration and their relationship with God?

If your congregation has a care shawl ministry, you might highlight it today along with the Beatitudes.

Editor's note: Care shawl is the better term for what we do in the Christian church. Prayer shawl has a specific meaning and purpose within the Jewish faith.

With Children

The prophet Micah shares with us that there are three things we are to do when we love God and follow God's ways: do justice, love kindness, and live humbly with God. Provide a basket of a variety of items (e.g., a cooking pot, shoes, a box of granola bars, a Bible, a laptop or tablet, felt pens and paper, a hymn book, a radio). Ask the younger folk what ideas they have for how these items might help us “do justice and show kindness and keep God the centre of our lives.” You might sing together VU 701 “What does the Lord require of you.”

Sermon Starter

The question “why?” is a divine-human question. When we ask God, “why?” God turns to us and offers, “Yes, why?” If we ask God, “Why is there hunger?” God asks us the same question, “Yes, why is there hunger? When there is enough food in the world, why is there hunger?”

Micah presents a court case, with God questioning the people. The conclusion is the famous verse 8, “to do justice, to love kindness, and walk humbly with God.”

The psalmist continues to ask “Who may abide in God's tent?” and lists qualifications. The 16th-century French Reform theologian John Calvin wrote that “churches are more or less pure,” as he recognized that we struggle to embody and live out the requirements of God's covenant. Paul wrote of how the world names what we attempt to do as foolishness. Albert Einstein is reputed to have said, “What is right is not always popular and what is popular is not always right.”

How do we do what is right and in accordance with Christ? The Beatitudes, as listed in Matthew, set out a constitution for Christian life. Usually, as in Luke 6:20–26, “blessings” are paired with “curses” but the parallel “curses” are missing. What are the curses or consequences for us of not adhering to the covenant relationship we have with God? What if we do not do our part? What does God require of us?

Hymns

Micah 6:1–8

VU 600 “When I needed a neighbour”

VU 701 “What does the Lord require of you”

MV 223 “We will go with God”

Psalm 15

VU 473 “Let all mortal flesh keep silence”

MV 18 “Lord, prepare me to be a sanctuary”

1 Corinthians 1:18–31

VU 149 “When I survey the wondrous cross”

VU 338 “Ask me what great thing I know”

Matthew 5:1–12

VU 68 “All poor ones and humble”

VU 222 “Come, let us sing”

VU 498 “God, who has caused to be written”

MV 171 “Christ has no body now but yours”

MV 213 “Take up his song”

TLUS* 128 “Blessed are you who are poor”

**Then Let Us Sing!*

February 8 – Fifth after Epiphany

Isaiah 58:1–9a (9b–12)

The fast that God chooses.

Psalms 112:1–9 (10) (VU p. 834)

Delight in God's commandments.

1 Corinthians 2:1–12 (13–16)

Wisdom through God's Spirit.

Matthew 5:13–20

You are salt; you are light.

Creation Connection

Wonder at the world around you for, as Socrates declared, "Wonder is the beginning of wisdom."

Spark

It is sometimes said that when young people reach their teens, their parents and the adults around them suddenly know nothing. We may have felt that way as teens. But then one day, we became the adults. How do we convey wisdom to the next generation? Do we try to find ways to share knowledge and wisdom when it isn't invited? The internet has had a profound impact on the sharing of knowledge and skills between generations. It used to be that young people learned from elders, but now they can do an internet search and watch a video. How is wisdom lost when there is no sharing between generations?

With Children

Explain that at one time, the starter button for a car used to be on the floor beside the clutch and not near the dashboard. In the 1940s, the starter button was moved and we started using a key, inserted into a special hole, to start the car. In recent years, we have moved away from using a key. Just because something has always been done one way doesn't mean that it will continue forever or that it always has to be done in a certain way. What if the adults went to Sunday school and the children stayed for worship? Ask the children what ideas they have for how they might do things differently in church. What is their wisdom? Have an adult or youth record the responses. Share them with appropriate church committees or the council. Are there one or two ideas that could be embraced or adapted to use in the congregation?

Sermon Starter

Isaiah preaches to people who have reverted to their old habits or their old ways of worship. They are fasting for the sake of fasting while not understanding it as a spiritual exercise. Can't they remember what God requires? How might our minds be sparked to remember what we have begun to forget? Isn't that one role of Christian community?

Psalms 112 is an acrostic poem in Hebrew—an aid to memory—where the first letter in each line when read downward spells out a message. It is also a Wisdom psalm that centres on the happiness of those who follow God. Wisdom is the integration of knowledge into a comprehensive entity. Writing to the Corinthians, Paul explains that such wisdom comes from living in union with the mystery of Christ. "No one can conceive what God has prepared for those who love him." Complete mystery. While salt preserves and light guides, Jesus seems to find both salt and light in the wisdom of the Torah. Ancient wisdom, ancient practices, and ancient forebears can all illuminate a pathway home. How do we remember the past, incorporate that wisdom into our lives, and journey confidently into the future?

Hymns

Isaiah 58:1–9a (9b–12)

VU 325 "Christ is made the sure foundation"

VU 421 "Lead on, O cloud of Presence"

1 Corinthians 2:1–12 (13–16)

VU 575 "I'm gonna live so God can use me"

VU 581 "When we are living"

MV 89 "Love is the touch"

Matthew 5:13–20

VU 87 "I am the light of the world"

VU 98 "How brightly beams the Morning Star"

VU 333 "Love divine, all loves excelling"

VU p. 892 "Who comes from God"

MV 10 "Come and seek the ways of Wisdom"

TLUS* 30 "We're the light of all the world"

**Then Let Us Sing!*

February 15 – Transfiguration Sunday

Exodus 24:12–18

God calls Moses up the mountain.

Psalm 2 (VU p. 725)

Serve God with holy fear.

or **Psalm 99** (VU p. 819)

God delights in justice.

2 Peter 1:16–21

The morning star rises in your hearts.

Matthew 17:1–9

Jesus transfigured on the mountain.

Creation Connection

How does light (or the energy behind what makes light) transform our everyday living? Welcome the energy of our life-giving sun each day.

Spark

Use a holographic picture and ask people if they can see behind the surface into the image that is hiding before them. Or share pictures that show two different images at once, such as the one of an older woman and a younger woman. Who sees which one first? Or, to explore the idea of mystery or the “unseen” in a way that doesn’t require sight, place various items in boxes with a hole just big enough for a hand. Can people guess the item by touch? Or you might play “guess the sound.” Include a variety of senses to relate to everyone. This might be a pre-worship activity.

With Children

Light a candle in a holder and then place a jar over it. As it starts to go out, lift the jar and watch it spring to life again. Describe what you are doing as you go along for those who may not be in a position to see what is happening. Although there is no water or wind, the candle starts to go out because we have cut off the oxygen, the breath it needs to burn. But as soon as we set the candle free, it comes to life again. In the same way, the unseen, often unnoticed breath of the Spirit brings new life to us. How can we keep ourselves open to the Spirit? How can we be a breath of new life for others and help them shine?

Sermon Starter

Moses goes up the mountain to receive the ten commandments (actually, 613 in total). While

there, he encounters God in a strange manner. The “Glory of the Lord” comes upon him. In Hebrew, the word is *Shekinah*, meaning “the Light of God’s Presence.” The *Shekinah* so changed him that when he came down, his face glowed. Think of the blessing (from Numbers 6:25): “May God’s face shine upon you and be gracious unto you.” The people experienced Moses in a new light.

The psalmist knew how God could change human existence and how an encounter with the Holy can make us children of the light. The epistle of Peter recounts the words from the baptism of Jesus and the Transfiguration, reminders to the early Christian community as it was wrestling with a way to define God in Jesus.

The Greek word for transfiguration is *metamorphothe* (μετεμορφώθη), meaning “he went through a metamorphosis.” Was it Jesus alone who went through a metamorphosis or did the disciples go through one as well? Think of the metamorphosis of a caterpillar to a butterfly. The same genetic material that goes into the chrysalis comes out as a winged insect, but we now experience it in a different light and with a different understanding. The light of God’s presence changes everything, but are we prepared to be changed? Mark Twain is reputed to have said that “the only person who likes change is a baby with a wet diaper.” How can we experience this scripture, ourselves, our communities of faith, and our world, in the light of God’s presence? This will change everything.

Hymns

Exodus 24:12–18

VU 255 “The living God be praised”

VU 421 “Lead on, O cloud of Presence”

VU 640 “Lead, kindly light”

VU 651 “Guide me, O thou great [and holy]”

VU 714 “Come, we that love”

MV 115 “Behold, I make all things new”

Psalm 2 or Psalm 99

VU 217 “All creatures of our God and King”

VU 223 “Eternal, Unchanging, we sing”

2 Peter 1:16–21

VU 98 “How brightly beams the Morning Star”

Matthew 17:1–9

VU 102 “Jesus on the mountain peak”

VU 103 “How good, Lord, to be here”

MV 114 “Behold the face of Christ”

MV 162 “Christ, within us hidden”