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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 *Crīstes 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 29 – Advent 1

Worship materials for Advent were contributed by Susan Girard and Brian Jackson, Riverview U.C., Atikokan, Ont.

Isaiah 64:1–9
Tear open the heavens and come down.
Psalm 80:1–7, 17–19 (VU p. 794 Part One)
Shine upon us, shepherd of Israel.
1 Corinthians 1:3–9
In every way, you have been enriched in Christ.
Mark 13:24–37
You will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds.

Creation Connection
Like the people in Isaiah 64:1–9, we suffer the consequences of turning away from God and not caring for God's Creation, such as irreversible climate change, cancer-causing chemicals in our water, and loss of species with whom we share Earth. Only through hope and faith can we restore God's Creation for all its inhabitants.

Spark
Liturgical colour: blue.
Sing VU 7 "Hope is a star" verse 1, while a child or someone young at heart moves up the aisle with a star (a glow stick, pillow, or paper star) and places it on a table covered with an Advent blue tablecloth. Next, add a piece of paper with the word HOPE painted in bright puff paint so it can be felt and seen. Use "Bringing God's Love to One Another: A Family-Friendly Advent Wreath Liturgy" (p. 68 and on GatheringWorship.ca).

With Children
Introduce the word *Advent*. What do the children know about the word? It means that something is coming. What or whom are we expecting to come?

Make ahead a large Sunday Advent calendar with the word *hope, peace, joy,* or *love* in puff paint on each window, along with a corresponding picture inside. The children can open one each Sunday.

Today we wait for the coming of Jesus with hope. What do you hope for? (Ask for things that can't be bought.) Where do you experience glimmers of love and kindness in your life? That's the presence of God. How do you spread love and kindness? That's *being* the presence of God. Sharing hope is a way of being kind.

For each Sunday of Advent, hand out crayons and a paper image. Today, provide a star. Invite the children to colour it and write down or draw an act of kindness they will do in the next week, then hang the stars on the Christmas tree (or a "kindness" tree you've created). Provide yarn, scissors, a hole punch, and volunteers to assist.

Sermon Starter
We may want to rush in and help fix or even erase the sometimes painful and natural consequences of someone else's choices. A butterfly struggles and works to break through the restraints of its cocoon. If someone with the best of intentions breaks it to help it escape, then the butterfly spends its short life wandering around on its legs, unable to fly. The struggle to emerge is what gives the butterfly strength and wisdom to fly. God is no enabler. God allows us to learn and grow from our actions, even when we turn away from God. Yet God is merciful and always with us.

How do we practise being awake to what God is up to in our lives and in the world? Are we aware of the presence of God when we discover beauty in the kindness of others, or feel the strength to face a challenge, or experience hope when a situation seems beyond our capability? Do we root ourselves in prayer, seeking to be the presence of love and kindness in our world?

Where do we need hope in our lives? Are we willing to journey in hope, knowing God is with us even when a solution is not apparent, even when we are frustrated with God or feel abandoned by God?

Hymns

VU 1	"O come, O come, Emmanuel" verse 2
VU 2	"Come, thou long-expected Jesus"
VU 6	"A candle is burning" verse 1
VU 7	"Hope is a star" verse 1
VU 266	"Amazing grace"
VU 424	"May the God of hope"
VU 703	"In the bulb there is a flower"
MV 19	"Maranatha" (introit for season)
MV 33	"Jesus came bringing us hope"
MV 83	"Let my spirit always sing"
MV 220	"Hope shines as the solitary star"
TLUS 49	"You are my strength"
TLUS 55	"We light this candle"
TLUS 56	"We long to know her"
TLUS 57	"We wait for God"

December 6 – Advent 2

Isaiah 40:1–11
Comfort, O comfort my people.
Psalm 85:1–2, 8–13 (VU p. 802)
Righteousness and peace will kiss.
2 Peter 3:8–15*a*
The day will come like a thief in the night.
Mark 1:1–8
The preaching of John the baptizer.

Creation Connection

One of the unfair consequences of climate change is that it disproportionally affects poorer nations, even though it is the more "developed" nations that contribute the most to the problem. Many of these poorer nations are very vulnerable to droughts and flooding, which will continue to displace millions from their homes. It will require all nations working together and sharing their resources to arrive at a peaceful solution.

Spark

Liturgical colour: blue.
Sing VU 7 "Hope is a star" verses 1 and 2, while a child or someone young at heart moves up the aisle with a symbol of peace (a peace sign, olive branch, or dove) and places it beside the symbol of hope on the table. Next, add a piece of paper with the word PEACE painted in bright puff paint so it can be felt and seen.

With Children

Open the second window on the Sunday Advent calendar. Invite the children to identify the word for today: *peace*.

Tell the story of John the Baptist. John may have seemed rough and tough. He sometimes used harsh language to get his message across. But what John wanted was for people to find peace in their hearts and to be at peace with each other and with God. Do you know someone who really wants the best for you and for other people but is sometimes a little gruff? Are you sometimes a little grumpy when you know that something is very important, but others won't listen to you? Maybe it was like that for John. But usually, kindness works the best.

Continue decorating the Christmas (or kindness) tree. Provide paper doves for the children. Invite them to add colour and write down or draw an act of kindness they will do in the next week, then hang the doves on the tree.

Sermon Starter

Where have we found peace in our lives? Where do we find God? In our church building? In the singing of hymns? In gathering together for worship? In listening to a sermon or reflection? Within ourselves? In nature? With friends? You might invite people to share aloud or in pairs.

Where do we find God when we are in a "foreign land"; that is, a situation that feels unusual for us, such as a wedding or memorial service where there is neither mention of God nor any prayers? How do you hold your faith while respecting the situation?

John preached change. What kind of change do we welcome? What change is harder to accept? What changes do we notice in our church and how do we live with them? What ideas do we have for change that would bring forward the peace and comfort found in today's scriptures? What are we willing to do to bring greater peace into our own lives and into this world that God loves so much?

Isaiah offers God's comfort. The psalm promises that compassion and peace will come together. Yet the epistle declares that God will come like a thief in the night. What might these passages offer as we think about what God is doing in our world today?

Hymns

VU 6	"A candle is burning" verses 1 and 2
VU 34	"Come now, O God of peace"
VU 44	"It came upon the midnight clear"
VU 226	"For the beauty of the earth"
VU 577	"I've got peace like a river"
VU 679	"Let there be light"
MV 19	"Maranatha"
MV 191	"What can I do?"
MV 215	"Peace be with you"
TLUS 12	"Give me a name"
TLUS 55	"We light this candle"
TLUS 107	"Come and rest in the arms of God"

December 13 – Advent 3

Isaiah 61:1–4, 8–11
The spirit of the Lord is upon me.
Psalm 126 (VU p. 850)
Sow in tears; reap in joy.
or **Luke 1:47–55** (VU pp. 898–899)
Song of Mary.
1 Thessalonians 5:16–24
Rejoice always; pray without ceasing.
John 1:6–8, 19–28
John testified to the Light.

Creation Connection

Nature is a source of joy for many people. Snowflakes drifting down on a still morning and melting on an outstretched hand, sunlight reflecting on a fresh blanket of snow, or impossibly bright stars shining in a clear, crisp night sky can be a source of joy and create a feeling of connection with something bigger than ourselves. How does nature bring joy to you and connect you to all of Creation and to God?

Spark

Liturgical colour: blue.
Sing VU 7 "Hope is a star" verses 1 to 3, while a child or someone young at heart moves up the aisle with a symbol of joy (a rainbow or rainbow flag) and places it beside the hope and peace symbols on the table. Next, add a piece of paper with the word JOY painted in bright puff paint so it can be felt and seen.

With Children

Open the third window on the Sunday Advent calendar. Invite the children to identify the word for today: *joy*.

Introduce the song of Isaiah, perhaps by singing "The spirit of the Lord is upon me" by Jim Strathdee (see hymnary.org). Or share the song from a children's or contemporary version of the Bible. When Jesus began his ministry, he quoted the first part of Isaiah's song to explain what he was going to do. Think about the things in the song. Why would they bring people joy? Why would Jesus want to bring people joy? Another idea is to share Mary's song from Luke.

Sharing joy with others is a kindness. Continue decorating the Christmas (or kindness) tree. Provide paper snowflakes for the children (or paper and scissors to create their own). Invite the children to add colour and write down or draw an act of kindness they will do in the next week, then hang the snowflakes on the tree.

Sermon Starter

Consider the passage from Isaiah and the Song of Mary (or choose one for this week and one for next). How do the words resonate with our lives and with our world today? In what ways do we identify as those who are vulnerable, broken-hearted, and in need? Do we long for freedom and release? Who else in the world do we recognize as among the vulnerable and broken-hearted longing for freedom and release? How do we know when the Spirit of God is at work among us? How is the Spirit of God calling and inspiring us to live our Christian faith in our everyday lives?

Isaiah, Mary, and John the Baptist were prophets. Who are the prophetic voices today? What messages are they giving to the church, to our society, and to the world? What is the prophetic role of the church?

Hymns

VU 6	"A candle is burning" verses 1, 2, and 3
VU 7	"Hope is a star" verses 1, 2, and 3
VU 175	"This is the day that God has made"
VU 226	"For the beauty of the earth"
VU 232	"Joyful, joyful we adore you"
VU 242	"Let all things now living"
VU 249	"Rejoice in the Lord always"
VU 296	"This is God's wondrous world"
VU 577	"I've got peace like a river" use *hope, peace, joy*
MV 40	"Never ending joy"
MV 157	"I am a child of God"
TLUS 8	"Way Maker"
TLUS 22	"Build a longer table"
TLUS 23	"For everyone born"
TLUS 55	"We light this candle"

December 20 – Advent 4

2 Samuel 7:1–11, 16
Who will build God's house?
Luke 1:47–55 (VU pp. 898–899)
Song of Mary.
or **Psalm 89:1–4, 19–26** (VU p. 804)
I sing of God's steadfast love.
Romans 16:25–27
Glory to God through Jesus Christ.
Luke 1:26–38
The angel Gabriel visits Mary.

Creation Connection

Our connection with the world begins with a compassionate and tender connection with ourselves. It requires acceptance and self-forgiving love flowing out from our hearts to nurture the world that God loves so much.

Spark

Liturgical colour: blue.
Sing VU 7 "Hope is a star" verses 1 to 4, while a child or someone young at heart moves up the aisle with a symbol of love (a large, heart-shaped pillow or picture) and places it beside the other symbols on the table. Next, add a piece of paper with the word LOVE painted in bright puff paint so it can be felt and seen.

With Children

Open the fourth window on the Sunday Advent calendar so the children can find today's word: *love*.

Tell the story of Mary and the angel. How would you feel if an angel suddenly appeared in your home? Mary was a little scared but still she said yes to what God asked, because she wanted to share God's love. But she was still feeling a bit scared and overwhelmed, so she went to visit someone special: her cousin Elizabeth. Telling Elizabeth about the angel and God's request helped her feel better. Have you ever been a bit scared and then felt better when you talked with someone who loves you? It's always good to share our fears and worries with those who love us.

Sharing love with others is one of the best ways to show kindness. Continue decorating the Christmas (or kindness) tree. Give the children paper hearts to colour and write down or draw an act of kindness for the week. At the end of the service or on Christmas Eve, they might take their ornaments home to hang on their own trees, to remind them of the gifts of Advent and the kindnesses they promised to share.

Sermon Starter

Love begins in each of us as we accept the beautiful person God created us to be. You may know of the poster or meme that declares "God does not create junk." We have all been made in the image of God, the *imago Dei*. All of us: powerful and oppressed, strong and weak, all religions and no religions, all nationalities and all genders, people of all stripes, sizes, and abilities. We are loved beyond comprehension by the audacious, extravagant love of God made flesh in Jesus. This is the psalmist's song of God's steadfast love. This is what God declared in choosing Mary as the mother of God's child. This is what Mary is declaring with her prophetic song.

How do we live out that audacious love of God? What are our impediments?

Loving ourselves may make us uncomfortable, and we may even squirm in our seats as this good news is shared; however, it is the truth. We were all loved by God before we were even born!

Mary said yes to God and the world was changed forever. In what small way can we each join Mary in expressing that truth, offering a yes as we come to the manger, bringing our whole selves gratefully and expectantly?

Hymns

VU 6	"A candle is burning" verses 1 to 4
VU 14	"To a maid whose name was Mary"
VU 372	"Though I may speak"
MV 12	"Come touch our hearts"
MV 26	"Your love is amazing"
MV 62	"There is room for all"
MV 79	"Spirit, open my heart"
MV 81	"Love us into fullness"
MV 89	"Love is the touch"
MV 134	"There was a child in Galilee"
MV 138	"My love colours outside the lines"
TLUS 10	"God calls you good"
TLUS 30	"We're the light of all the world"
TLUS 55	"We light this candle"
TLUS 116	"Are these not empty words?"
TLUS 118	"It's not enough"

"Love is lifted" by Brian Jackson (see p. 59)

December 24 – Christmas Eve (Thursday)

Worship materials for Christmas Eve to New Year's Day were contributed by Christine Jerrett, Shiloh-Inwood P.C., Inwood, Ont.

Isaiah 9:2–7
A child has been born for us.
Psalm 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

As we live into Luke's story of Jesus' birth, we learn that, in the midst of massive, destructive upheavals, culturally and climatically, the church's work is to attend to, to protect, and to nurture the refugia, the small, hidden spaces where God is creating new life. This understanding of the term refugia comes from *Refugia Faith: Seeking Hidden Shelters, Ordinary Wonders, and the Healing of the Earth* by Debra Rienstra (Fortress Press, 2022).

Spark

Liturgical colours: white/gold.
Many congregations close the Christmas Eve service by singing "Silent night" while the congregation holds candles. For children or those unsure of holding a lit candle, offer glow sticks, perhaps ones with stars on the end, or battery-operated candles that can be reused.

With Children

Welcome the children by name. If you don't know all their names, invite them to share them with you. Ask, "How would you feel if instead of calling you by your name, I just said, 'Welcome child number 3257' or 'I'm glad you're here person number 5629' or 'Please help me, worker number 9821'?" How do you feel when someone remembers your name? Exactly. It shows you matter to them and that you belong and are part of the community.

On Christmas Eve, we get to know God by the name Jesus. In Jesus, God comes to us to dwell among us, to share our lives in all our sadness, difficulty, joy, and messiness. Another name we have for Jesus is Emmanuel, which means "God is with us."

Invite the children to identify the names of the people that Luke included in his telling of the Christmas story. Ask them to name some people who have told them the story of Jesus' birth. Offer a prayer that includes all these names, thanking God for including them all in Jesus' story.

Sermon Starter

Luke begins the story of Christmas with Caesar Augustus issuing a decree, calling for a census.

Caesar's census was used to raise taxes and conscript people to serve in the military. Under the Roman military occupation, the census was dehumanizing and demoralizing. People were reduced to a number as the Roman agenda was implemented and they were manipulated to serve Caesar's goals. The glorious complexity of human lives was reduced to be made useful in the Roman agenda.

One of the first things that Christmas means is that God comes in Jesus to restore our humanity. Two people whom Caesar would reduce to taxable units were named Joseph and Mary. They were part of a long, storied tradition. Their lives were shaped by the people and relationships and events that took place in a small village called Bethlehem.

On Christmas Eve, we enter into this story. We remember that we are more than just numbers on a spreadsheet. We are made in the image of God. Receive the great gift of Jesus reclaiming us as persons, greatly loved by God, infinitely precious.

Hymns

VU 36	"Angels, from the realms of glory"
VU 38	"Angels we have heard on high"
VU 44	"It came upon the midnight clear"
VU 48	"Hark! the herald angels sing"
VU 50	"He is born"
VU 59	"Joy to the world"
VU 60	"O come, all ye faithful"
VU 64	"O little town of Bethlehem"
VU 67	"Silent night, holy night"
VU 74	"What child is this"
MV 33	"Jesus came bringing us hope"
MV 162	"Christ, within us hidden"
TLUS 131	"Child of spirit, child of light
TLUS 132	"In a far-off place"

December 25 – Christmas Day (Friday)

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 surprising, world-changing news of Jesus' birth comes to a small group of ordinary people on the fringes of the culture. With our imaginations shaped by stories of shepherds and a manger in Bethlehem, we anticipate God's work of healing Creation in small, humble, hidden places and among people on the edges. Refer to *Refugia Faith: Seeking Hidden Shelters, Ordinary Wonders, and the Healing of the Earth* by Debra Rienstra (Fortress Press, 2022).

Spark

Liturgical colours: white/gold.
There is an old rabbinic saying that goes "Everyone should have two pieces of paper in their pocket. On one is written, 'For my sake, the world was created'; on the other, 'I am but dust and ashes.'" Write these messages on two slips of paper for each person, and invite them to put the papers in their pockets and refer to them as needed. (See the sermon "Two Rocks in the Pocket" by Andrew Stirling, available online.)

With Children

Ask the children what their favourite part of the Christmas story is. Give them some paper and markers or crayons. Ask them to draw a picture of that part of the Christmas story during the sermon or message. At the offering time, invite them to bring forward the pictures they have made and describe them to the congregation. Gently remind the adults to receive the stories graciously and not laugh at what the children may share. Offer a prayer of thanks for the children and their stories.

Sermon Starter

Caesar was a master at making the Roman Empire work effectively. However, in the story, Caesar doesn't stay in charge for long. Luke gives him three sentences. Then, another reality pulls us into a holy drama happening on the edges of Caesar's managed world. Effective government policy gives way to interruption, confusion, and an unexpected journey at an inconvenient time.

We experience unregulated powers loose in this world: Countless angels in the sky bring strange messages to shepherds working the night shift, and glorious songs give notice that the God of the highest heavens is on the move and promises made long ago are being fulfilled.

This story reminds us that there is more going on in our lives than getting things done efficiently and effectively. There is glory, wonder, awe. God is entering into your life and mine. Jesus is restoring the image of God in us. The Holy Spirit is refusing to let us settle for a reduced humanness. In this story, there is the great dignity and deep goodness for which God created us.

This life is holy, filled with the glory of God. Your life, mine, the lives of our neighbours, strangers—even our enemies—all are holy and precious. All treasured. Jesus comes and dwells among us, reclaiming us as God's beloved community.

Hymns

Isaiah 62:6–12
VU 10 "Prepare the way of the Lord"
TLUS 151 "Holy One, may your presence here"
Psalm 97
VU 59 "Joy to the world"
"Blessed be the Lord God Almighty" by Bob Fitts hymnary.org
Titus 3:4–7
VU 35 "Good Christian friends, rejoice"
VU 62 "Once in royal David's city"
Luke 2:8–20
VU 36 "Angels, from the realms of glory"
VU 43 "Go, tell it on the mountain"
VU 58 "Infant holy, infant lowly"
VU 60 "O come, all ye faithful"
VU 68 "All poor ones and humble"
VU 76 "See amid the winter's snow"
VU 361 "Small things count"
MV 158 "Dream a dream"
TLUS 132 "In a far-off place"

December 27 – First After Christmas

Isaiah 61:10—62:3
God clothes me with salvation and righteousness.
Psalm 148 (VU p. 871)
Let all Creation praise God.
Galatians 4:4–7
No longer enslaved but a child of God.
Luke 2:22–40
Jesus is presented in the temple.

Creation Connection

Since Psalm 148 invites us to consider all Creation (angels, sky and sea, creatures large and small, human beings from all places) as part of the worshipping community, in what ways could you purposefully invite your church to join the chorus of Creation or invite the chorus of Creation into your worship?

Spark

Liturgical colours: white/gold.
Invite people ahead of time to bring in photos of past "elders" of the congregation (or to send in photos to be made into a video). Display them during the worship service and offer prayers of thanks for these people and the ways they helped the congregation notice what God was doing in their midst.

With Children

Building on the Spark, share the stories of people who were "the faithful" in the history of your congregation, e.g., the Annas and Simeons. Invite people in the congregation to tell the stories of the people in the photos—how they helped others to know and love Jesus.

Sermon Starter

Simeon and Anna are ordinary people spending their lives out of the spotlight, on the fringes. They are not celebrities or leaders mentioned in the local news. We know about them simply because they have been caught up in God's great and holy purposes. Out of lives disciplined by prayer and worship, they witness to God's faithfulness. God is fulfilling God's promises to save our world.

Everyone needs a messenger from God who will reassure us of God's presence and love when we have been waiting a very long time and are tempted to give up. Everyone needs a Simeon and an Anna. We are part of a community that is learning how to lean into the faithfulness of God, even when that faithfulness is not evident for long periods of time. We wait and watch just like Simeon and Anna. As we tell their stories, we remember that we, too, are a people whose lives are shaped by the promises of God. Our lives, too, have a holy and sacred purpose. Much of the time, we may not know what that purpose is, but we wait to discover it with spirits disciplined, like theirs, by prayer and worship.

Hymns

Isaiah 61:10—62:3
VU 31 "O Lord, how shall I meet you"
TLUS 66 "Abba, Sky-Father, Earth-Mother"
Psalm 148
VU 217 "All creatures of our God and King"
VU 245 "Praise the Lord with the sound of trumpet"
MV 30 "It's a song of praise to the Maker"
TLUS 2 "A strand in the web of life let me be"
Luke 2:22–40
VU 2 "Come, thou long-expected Jesus"
VU 48 "Hark! the herald angels sing"
VU 59 "Joy to the world"
VU p. 902 and p. 903 "Song of Simeon"
TLUS 10 "God calls you good"
TLUS 12 "Give me a name"
General/Seasonal
MV 158 "Dream a dream"
TLUS 132 "In a far-off place"
TLUS 142 "As a parent holds a child"

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 (Friday)

Ecclesiastes 3:1–13
For everything there is a season.
Psalm 8 (VU pp. 730–732)
We are crowned with God's glory.
Revelation 21:1–6*a*
A new heaven and a new earth.
Matthew 25:31–46
When I was hungry, you gave me food.

Creation Connection

Psalm 8 gives us language to pray for the diminished and ruined places of our earth, language that gives voice to the wonder that forms us as creatures made in the image of God, language that shapes in us the humility we so desperately need if we are to care faithfully for God's good Creation.

Spark

Liturgical colours: white/gold.
As a way of considering our commitments in the new year, invite people to renew their baptism or include John Wesley's covenant renewal service. (See "Covenanting the New Year, Methodist Style" on GatheringWorship.ca.)

With Children

Show some small seeds and photos of stars. What do these have in common? God is the creator of all and lives in covenant* relationship with all things. Where do humans fit in? We have been made partners with God in that covenant relationship—to care for it all with gratitude and love. Isn't that amazing? We are connected with seeds and stars and each other, because of God.
**You might explain the word* covenant *as a promise and a commitment between God and people.*

Sermon Starter

Ecclesiastes is a poem that assembles the wisdom that the author, Qohelet, gained throughout his life: What is it that makes for a good life? Qohelet has tried it all—accumulating money, working hard, playing hard, success, power, fame. At the end of his days, he realizes that you cannot make your life mean something because everything you achieve is eventually swept away by death. When all else is gone, he finds himself met by God—Creator, Holy Mystery, and, most of all, God the great Giver. This God gives every moment and activity its appropriate time. That is what makes our lives holy—not our attempts to achieve a good life, but God's presence in every moment that is given to us.

The promise given to us through Jesus is that we are born out of the gift of God's love. We die into that love. Every part of our living, in between birth and death, is held by that love that is God's redeeming power.

This is the deepest truth of our lives—a truth that holds even when all else is taken from us. Hold to this truth as you live the life God has given you.

Hymns

Ecclesiastes 3:1–13
MV 83 "Let my spirit always sing"
MV 147 "God, help us to treasure"
Psalm 8
VU 308 "Many and great, O God"
*Revelation 21:1–6*a
MV 4 "All who are thirsty"
Matthew 25:31–46
VU 87 "I am the light of the world"
VU 312 "Praise with joy the world's Creator"
TLUS 22 "Build a longer table"
TLUS 23 "For everyone born"
TLUS 30 "We're the light of all the world"
General/Seasonal
VU 79 "Arise, your light is come"
VU 529 "Great God, we sing that mighty hand"
VU 530 "All beautiful the march of days"
VU 639 "One more step along the world I go"

Worship Leaders

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

Written by _____ . **Gathering**, Advent/Christmas/Epiphany 2026/2027, page _____ . Used with permission.

January 3 – Second After Christmas

Worship materials for the Second After Christmas to the Second After Epiphany were contributed by Emily Gordon, Bathurst U.C., Toronto, Ont., and Burningbush Eco-ministry, supporting ministers and communities of faith in transforming how we can be communities of faith during the climate crisis. Visit their YouTube channel.

Jeremiah 31:7–14
The grieving people will be gathered in joy.
Psalm 147:12–20 (VU pp. 868–869)
God grants peace and abundance.
Ephesians 1:3–14
Adopted, forgiven, and blessed with abundance.
John 1:(1–9) 10–18
The Word was in the world, but the world did not know him.

Creation Connection

Psalm 147 imagines winter (snow, frost, hail, and cold) being given by God. These elements are used as a sign of God's power but also a gift given to us and the world. Where can we find the gift in winter?

Spark

Liturgical colours: white/gold.
Set up a "watered garden" (Jeremiah 31:12) in the entrance to the sanctuary, using houseplants from your home or those of the congregation. Invite people to write on cards about how their life is like a watered garden or what they need in order to feel that they are "watered," then place the cards in the garden as they arrive or leave. Maybe they'd like to water a plant as well.

With Children

The literal translation of John 1:14 is that the Word became flesh and *pitched his tent among us*. Invite stories of camping trips and camping failures (bonus if anyone has been winter camping), then ask what we notice about the idea of pitching a tent. Tents can be moved easily, so God is always with us. In a tent, we also feel much closer to everything around us (including insects, animals, rain, and nearby campers) than we do in buildings. To make the time interactive, bring in a small tent and pitch it together as you talk.

Sermon Starter

The second Sunday of Christmas is both the start of a new year and the start of the story of Jesus' life. It brings us back to the beginning, and John's gospel begins with the start of everything. We begin with presence—the Word made flesh and dwelling (pitching a tent) among us. When something new begins—a new year, a new chapter, a new job, a new relationship—we can be tempted to hit the ground running and get busy with lists, actions, and resolutions. Here, we are invited to begin differently, by being present and attentive to the divine presence. In that space, we are invited to recognize what is already there—where God is dwelling and creating.
As we practise being present—to ourselves, to God, to other human beings, and to our more-than-human relations—we are able to notice the wonder around us: the glory, grace, and truth. When have you practised being present at the start of something new? When has being present allowed you to recognize the sacred? What new beginning (welcome or unwelcome) is your community of faith experiencing, and how can you practise being present to God's presence together?

Hymns

Jeremiah 31:7–14
VU 260 "God who gives to life its goodness"
MV 26 "Your love is amazing"
TLUS 62 "In all times past"
Psalm 147
MV 71 "When the wind of winter blows"
TLUS 43 "Salamat sa Iyo"
TLUS 56 "We long to know her"
Ephesians 1:3–14
MV 2 "Come all you people"
MV 22 "God of all the world"
TLUS 10 "God calls you good"
John 1:(1–9) 10–18
MV 45 "You are holy"
MV 49 "When we seek language"
MV 211 "Go now in peace, guided by the light"
TLUS 8 "Way Maker"
General/Seasonal
VU 45 "Joy is now in every place"
VU 55 "In the bleak midwinter"

January 6 – Epiphany (Wednesday)

Isaiah 60:1–6
Arise, shine; for your light has come.
Psalm 72:1–7, 10–14 (VU p. 790 Parts 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

Today's readings bring our attention to the sky, sun, moon, and stars. However, when we look at the night sky, usually the first thing we notice is not a star but a satellite. In 2019, there were roughly 2,000 active satellites; in 2026, that number surpassed 14,500. This rise has led to a growing concern about satellite pollution, including light pollution, emissions caused by satellite launches, and chemicals released when they de-orbit and burn up in the atmosphere. What is the impact on us as human beings when the night sky changes this much and we stop being able to see Creator's stars because of human satellites?

Spark

Liturgical colours: white/gold.
"Star words" is a growing Epiphany practice in Protestant churches. Individuals randomly pick from a container of words, which are often written on paper stars. The word becomes a gift for the day, week, or season, and contemplating the word opens up a powerful space for the movement of the Spirit and personal discernment. Search *star words for Epiphany* online, or look at the resources from the website A Sanctified Art. I like using construction paper and writing the words prayerfully as I prepare them for the congregation. Then I have children or youth, if present, pass out the stars on communion plates during the service.

With Children

In addition to the star words, consider creating a star light by cutting out a star shape from heavy paper and taping the paper over a strong flashlight. Shine it around the sanctuary for the children to follow, beginning with places of apparent riches or authority (the pulpit, communion table) and eventually finding Jesus (a picture or a doll) in an out-of-the-way place, such as under a rocking chair in the children's area or under a back pew. The magi searched for Jesus, first in a palace, but then found him in an ordinary home in a small town. What does this tell us about Jesus and where Jesus likes to hang out?

Sermon Starter

Both myrrh and frankincense are gum resins, harvested by cutting or tapping trees. Unlike maple sap, these gums quickly harden into resin. The resins are then turned into incense, perfume, and medicine. Robb McCoy's blog post "Epiphany – The First Baby Shower" offers two useful observations about the gifts of the magi. First, both frankincense and myrrh had been used medicinally for millennia and could have had value for Mary's postpartum healing. Second, all the gifts were life-giving for Mary and Joseph, medicinally but also economically because gold provided means as they were forced to flee from Herod. Rather than being symbolic, the magi's gifts were deeply practical, a matter of Mary and Joseph's survival and thus the survival of baby Jesus. The story of the magi invites us to imagine the gifts we bring Jesus and Mary now. How can they be practical, generous, and connected to caring for people and Creation? How are we engaged in this kind of gift-giving with those we know and with those who are vulnerable in our communities and beyond?

Hymns

Isaiah 60:1–6
VU 79 "Arise, your light is come"
TLUS 30 "We're the light of all the world"
Psalm 72
MV 87 "Water flowing from the mountains"
TLUS 35 "Bless the Lord, O my soul"
Ephesians 3:1–12
MV 10 "Come and seek the ways of Wisdom"
TLUS 147 "There's no need to ask me twice"
Matthew 2:1–12
VU 78 "Sing till sundown"
VU 89 "From a distant home"
VU 93 "When heaven's bright with mystery"
VU 94 "Lovely star in the sky"
VU 97 "When a Star is shining"

January 10 – Baptism of the Lord

Genesis 1:1–5
The first days of Creation.
Psalm 29 (VU p. 756)
God's voice is over the waters.
Acts 19:1–7
Paul baptizes with the Spirit.
Mark 1:4–11
Jesus is baptized by John.

Creation Connection

Did you know that the Jordan River, one of the main characters of today's gospel story, is disappearing? Water diversion, overuse, and pollution are all factors contributing to a river flow that is less than 10 percent of its historical average. The Jordan is one of many disappearing rivers around the world, with climate change causing loss of habitat, reduced biodiversity, and increased water temperature, flooding, and soil erosion. Where is the (baptismal) hope for renewal and new life for our rivers?

Spark

Liturgical colours: white/gold.
Make the font with water in it central, offering either an opportunity for asperging or a ritual time for people to come forward, dip their hands, and remember their baptism. For asperging, give children and youth cedar boughs and lots of permission to get each other wet. Be aware of anything that shouldn't get wet.

With Children

After Jesus' baptism, God told him, "You are my child, my beloved"—words that God says to all of us. Invite everyone to go around saying or signing to one another that "God loves you" or "You are loved." (Why not teach everyone to sign these phrases?) Two wonderful books you may use, both by Matthew Paul Turner, are *When God Made You* (Convergent Children's, 2017) and *When God Made Light* (Convergent Children's, 2018).* You might read an excerpt, and the story could be continued in Sunday school.
**Please seek permission through the Penguin Random House permissions portal.*

Sermon Starter

Today's gospel reading begins and ends in the wilderness. John the Baptist comes from the wilderness preaching repentance, and Jesus is sent out into the wilderness for 40 days and nights directly after his baptism. Mark specifically mentions wild animals (1:13), as well as locusts and wild honey (1:6). Added to these connections with Creation are those made between people—John, the crowds, and Jesus—and the divine connection expressed as a spirit descending in the form of a dove and a divine voice. Love exists in relationships and connection. The divine words are both personal and shared while Jesus is surrounded by human and more-than-human community. The trouble is that being around others is harder. There is more work, more hurt, and more need for forgiveness. What is your community of faith already doing to engage this hard work? How have you witnessed to the sacred in our interconnectedness? Where can you offer the sacred voice of love?

Hymns

VU 82	"A light is gleaming"
VU 305	"Into the unshaped silence"
VU 380	"She comes sailing on the wind"
VU 449	"Crashing waters at creation"
MV 3	"River"
MV 13	"O let the power fall on me"
MV 157	"I am a child of God"
MV 161	"I have called you by your name"
TLUS 3	"A whisper from the universe"
TLUS 7	"God spoke to the darkness"
TLUS 9	"Glory, glory, glory to God"
TLUS 10	"God calls you good"

January 17 – Second After Epiphany

1 Samuel 3:1–10 (11–20)
God calls Samuel.
Psalm 139:1–6, 13–18 (VU p. 861)
God has searched and known me.
1 Corinthians 6:12–20
Your body is a temple of God's Spirit.
John 1:43–51
Jesus calls Philip and Nathanael.

Creation Connection

Many of us feel closest to the sacred in nature, near a lake, river, or ocean, in a forest, or watching a vibrant sunset. Psalm 139 reminds us that we cannot escape God's presence (including in cities, suburbs, or indoors). Both God and nature are everywhere. We just need to pay attention more actively in some places than others.

Spark

Liturgical colour: green.
Lean into God's love for us throughout our lives by accompanying the reading of Psalm 139 with a slide show of baby photos—mixing photos of babies from the congregation past and present with photos of baby animals and plants. If you don't project during the service, create a photo display near the entrance with images surrounding Psalm 139:13, 15.

With Children

Invite the children to act out the story of Samuel with you. Prepare an adult or older youth to be Eli, and ask all the children to be Samuel. Begin by having them lie down around the communion table, just as Samuel lay down near the Ark of the Covenant. The Christ candle can act as the lamp. When you call out, "Samuel, Samuel," cue the children to get up, go to Eli, and respond, "Here I am." Eli sends them back to sleep. Repeat several times. On the final time, after Eli tells them to respond with "Speak, God, your servant is listening," call each child by their name to wake them and invite them to respond. You might end by asking them what they noticed and experienced in acting out the story.

Sermon Starter

Today's two call stories both have a mix of direct call and the invitation or guidance of others. Eli helps Samuel realize what is happening and how to respond, while Philip invites Nathanael to "come and see." What are your own direct and indirect experiences of being called? As you think about call and vocation, you may wish to turn to Frederick Buechner's understanding of call as the place where our gladness and the world's hunger intersect.

For many who aren't in ministry, the idea of being called to paid or volunteer work is a powerful new way to think about what they do. How do we help others with their discerning? The more specific call to a particular vocation or volunteer work is part of the wider call to discipleship that we all experience. Everyone present has in some way responded to God's call, and some have very precise stories of who invited and welcomed them. What are the stories of call and welcome that float through your church? You might ask what holds us back from saying "come and see*" to others? To whom might you say "come and see*" this season?
*or *come and experience* or *come and check us out*

Hymns

VU 509	"I, the Lord of sea and sky"
VU 567	"Will you come and follow me"
VU 569	"You call us out"
VU 572	"Send me, Lord"
MV 17	"God in the darkness"
MV 110	"First-born of Mary"
MV 131	"You, Creator God, have searched me"
MV 161	"I have called you by your name"
TLUS 138	"Let's go together"
TLUS 146	"The Holy One has chosen you"
TLUS 147	"There's no need to ask me twice"
TLUS 148	"We have been called"

SHARE YOUR COMMENTS AND IDEAS

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

January 24 – Third After Epiphany

Worship materials for the Third After Epiphany to Transfiguration Sunday were contributed by Laura Turnbull and Fern Gibbard, Penticton, B.C.

Jonah 3:1–5, 10
Jonah calls Nineveh to repent.
Psalm 62:5–12 (VU pp. 779–780)
Be still, my soul and wait for God.
1 Corinthians 7:29–31
The time is short for the present form of the world.
Mark 1:14–20
Jesus calls Simon, Andrew, James, and John.

Creation Connection

We are challenged in the psalm to wait for God. In contrast, Creation asks us to act with urgency and determination—there is no time to waste—so that God's majesty can be praised. How are both waiting and acting urgently part of our faithful response?

Spark

Liturgical colour: green.
Large posters could be put around the sanctuary bearing messages such as *WANTED long distance messenger. Must be familiar with route to Nineveh; OPPORTUNITY AVAILABLE to be a disciple of Jesus of Nazareth. Recruiting on Galilee lakeshore.*

Provide an opportunity for people to meditate on their response to God's call. Perhaps some would be willing to share what came to them during the time of silence.

With Children

Call the children to follow you as you play a version of Follow the Leader or Simon/Simone Says for a few minutes. Adapt the game for your context. Then discuss how we call others or welcome them into a group or a game. For example, how might you include a new friend into your play group or classroom? That's what Jesus did. He called people to join his group and made them feel welcomed and included. We follow his lead.

Sermon Starter

If you base your service on the reading from Jonah, it is well worth consulting all four chapters of Jonah for background material and to get the whole story in your mind.

Simon, Andrew, James, and John answered the call of Jesus immediately, leaving their previous lives behind in order to follow him. When Jonah heard God's call, he turned around and ran away. However, God is persistent and gives us second chances.

The messages delivered by both Jonah and the disciples was one that resulted in change and salvation for other people. Change can be difficult and sometimes must be dealt with immediately, as Paul tells us in his epistle to the Corinthians. This is when we rely on the message found in Psalm 62. Even as we need to act quickly, we take time to wait for God's presence.

The people of Nineveh repented at the last minute, thus avoiding the destruction that God had promised. When we experience wickedness going unpunished, do we, like Jonah, think of it as unfair? Or do we understand it as the ultimate display of God's love and mercy? Think of Jacob prospering after cheating Esau of his birthright, or the prodigal son who was celebrated even after dishonouring his father and wasting his inheritance, or the workers who had received a full day's pay even though they had only been hired late in the afternoon. Scripture is full of examples. Are these cases of God loving the sinner, the one who has caused hurt, more than we do?

Hymns

Jonah 3:1–5, 10
TLUS 100 "In my wrestling, and in my doubts"
TLUS 147 "There's no need to ask me twice"
Psalm 62
VU 655 "All my hope on God is founded"
I Corinthians 7:29–31
VU 215 "Hope of the world"
Mark 1:14–20
VU 117 "Jesus Christ is waiting"
VU 562 "Jesus calls us"
VU 686 "God of grace and God of glory"
MV 113 "Jesus saw them fishing"
MV 161 "I have called you by your name"
TLUS 149 "Yeshuko pachhi"
General/Seasonal
VU 288 "Great is thy faithfulness"
VU 416 "Forth in your name, O Christ"
MV 209 "Go, make a diff'rence"
MV 212 "Sent out in Jesus' name"

January 31 – Fourth After Epiphany

Deuteronomy 18:15–20
God will raise up a prophet after Moses.
Psalm 111 (VU p. 833)
The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom.
1 Corinthians 8:1–13
Concerning food offered to idols.
Mark 1:21–28
A man with an unclean spirit is healed in Capernaum.

Creation Connection

God's Creation is in danger. Do we heed these urgent calls for action to save God's greatest gifts to us? In what ways is Creation putting out the call for help?

Spark

Liturgical colour: green.
Display a farmhouse dinner bell or triangle and other items, such as a bullhorn and flashing light, that can be used to call us to a meal or warn us of danger. God and Jesus are calling us with a sense of urgency to respond to the way of justice, healing, and mercy.

You might use VU 616 "A Prayer for Healing."

With Children

Ask the children, "How do you call someone?" As they are answering, have two people with cellphones from within the congregation cued and ready to call one another after a few of the children's answers. In the phone call, one loudly urges the other to be ready to share God's message with all the people who are at church. The other person offers some resistance but then understands the urgency. Make sure the ring on the phone is a blaring one and not melodic. Follow up with a conversation about how God calls us, building on the stories from last week.

Sermon Starter

As people who are known to follow Jesus, we are called to speak up and speak out, to raise our voices and our concerns! The call is not a one-time-only call, but rather, it is repeated. We are given second chances. And most of us need lots of second chances! Notice that in scripture, God calls a leader and messenger from amongst the people. Moses is a well-known member of the community and deeply understands the struggle of whether to respond to God's call.

We may ask ourselves, *Where have all the prophets gone?* Then we are challenged to be those prophets, to voice concerns about health care, poverty, lack of housing, the environment, and all the "isms" of our troubled world—and to do so with authority. If our world is to be healed, just as the man with the unclean spirit was healed, we must pay attention to the liberating message that is presented to us.

Hymns

Deuteronomy 18:15–20
MV 209 "Go, make a diff'rence"
TLUS 2 "A strand in the web of life let me be"
TLUS 136 "Je connais les projets"
1 Corinthians 8:1–13
VU 672 "Take time to be holy"
MV 212 "Sent out in Jesus' name"
TLUS 22 "Build a longer table"
Mark 1:21–28
VU 334 "All hail the power of Jesus' name"
VU 344 "How sweet the name of Jesus sounds"
VU 570 "Jesus' hands were kind hands"
VU 617 "I love you, God, who heard my cry"
VU 620 "Silence, frenzied, unclean spirit"
VU 622 "Your hands, O Christ"
MV 113 "Jesus saw them fishing"
TLUS 95 "Come to me, O weary traveler"
TLUS 99 "I am sending you light"

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 2026/2027, page _____. Droit d'utilisation accordé.

February 7 – Transfiguration Sunday

2 Kings 2:1–12
Elijah is taken up into heaven.
Psalm 50:1–6 (VU p. 775)
God summons the earth.
2 Corinthians 4:3–6
The light of knowledge shines in our hearts.
Mark 9:2–9
The Transfiguration of Jesus.

Creation Connection

After a bleak, dry desert (or winter) time, the rains fall and the cactus, poppies, and other plants burst forth in a carpet of life and colour! Transfiguration is all around us. Be attentive!

Spark

Liturgical colour: green.
To highlight the call to transformation and transfiguration, engage people by planting bulbs in pots and watering them until they grow and blossom. You might also decorate with flowering plants and cacti.

This is the beginning of Black History Month. Consult The United Church of Canada's racial justice resources, such as the "40 Days of Engagement on Anti-Racism: A Place at the Table."

With Children

Play with light. Options: 1) Share glow sticks and enjoy how they glow and change colour. 2) Light sparklers and watch how they emit light. 3) Shine flashlights in the shadowed corners of the sanctuary to transform them into brightness. 4) Cover flashlights with cellophane of different colours.

Or set up a small Christmas tree with unlit strings of lights on it. At first, it is just a plain old tree. Then turn on the lights. An ordinary tree has been transformed into a Christmas tree. Light is magical and mysterious.

Share the story of Jesus' Transfiguration and how he appeared to be glowing. It showed us that Jesus can transform even the shadows and hard parts of our lives into something better.

Sermon Starter

We encounter the passing of the torch from Elijah to Elisha. We experience Elijah teaching the younger Elisha, showing mentorship at its finest. We can learn from Elisha to be persistent and attentive. "I will not leave you," Elisha promises Elijah over and over again. His willingness to complete the journey with Elijah leads to a beautiful experience of vulnerability, forsakenness, and grief. With whom are we called to faithfully journey, offering them the words "I will not leave you"?

When our light shines, the real light of God for the world is revealed in Jesus Christ, through us. Paul calls for people to be discontent with brokenness, injustice, scarcity, exploitation, violence, and death, for what God seeks is to increase community, wholeness, justice, peace, and love.

The gospel suggests that the Transfiguration terrifies and confuses the disciples. What about us? What do we fear? What do we believe? In *The Word Today* (Volume 1, Year B, pp. 115–116), Herbert O'Driscoll suggests that the Transfiguration of Jesus is about the transformation of the disciples. For a fleeting moment, the eyes and hearts of the disciples open to the unimaginable glory of the incarnation in Jesus! Often, we fail to experience the glory around us. It is in moments of transformation that we discover the truth about Jesus.

Hymns

2 Kings 2:1–12
VU 103 "How good, Lord, to be here"
VU p. 806 "O God, our help in ages past"
TLUS 41 "Jukkeseo wangwiye"
2 Corinthians 4:3–6
MV 7 "Gather us in"
MV 82 "Bathe me in your light"
MV 115 "Behold, behold, I make all things new"
TLUS 73 "Open my heart"
Mark 9:2–9
VU 82 "A light is gleaming"
VU 87 "I am the light of the world"
VU 102 "Jesus on the mountain peak"
VU 104 "We have come at Christ's own bidding"
VU 368 "Holy Spirit, truth divine"
VU 369 "O Holy Spirit, enter in"
TLUS 40 "Comment ne pas te louer?"
TLUS 100 "In my wrestling, and in my doubts"
on hymnary.org
"This little light of mine" African American
"Shine, Jesus, shine" by Graham Kendrick