

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel One-Rehearsal Christmas Pageant

The basic idea for this service came from discussions within the Children & Youth Worship team at High River United Church. Then, some of the youth and children in the congregation offered additional ideas and words to help create the Call to Worship, Prayer of the Day, Prayers of the People, and Commissioning and Benediction.

This play was originally written about 18 months after the 2013 flood in High River, Alberta, which devastated our whole town. So many people were still struggling to rebuild, renovate, and re-establish homes and businesses. As the Children & Youth team imagined this service, the message we needed to offer became clear: God is with us! We are not alone!



We drew on the name for Jesus offered in Matthew 1:23: “Emmanuel” means “God is with us.” Then we began to imagine what each of those present at the birth of Jesus, as recorded in the gospels of Luke and Matthew, would have experienced and felt.

I had the task of taking the ideas and images and giving them shape and words. In writing the actual script, I sought to capture a variety of emotions, reflecting the post-flood feelings of our community but also realizing that not everyone was joyful and not all was silent on that holy night about 2,000 years ago. In fact, it was a rather messy night that unfolded in a rather smelly stable and involved an odd cast of characters. That’s why each character who offers a monologue reflects a different emotion and perspective. Yet all find comfort in the sheep’s words, which echo those in A New Creed: “God is with us; we are not alone!”

Why a sheep? Well, one of our youth really wanted to be a sheep and really wanted a speaking part. As well, having a sheep speak the words of reassurance reminds us that Jesus is referred to as both lamb and shepherd in scripture and in our tradition.

I hope you’ll enjoy using this adapted version of our original service; please feel free to adapt it for your context.

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Production Notes

- If any children and youth in the congregation take music lessons, this service is a great opportunity for them to share their love of music.
- At a minimum, this service requires just one rehearsal or even one just involving the five people doing the monologues and the one or two sheep who speak. The people doing

scripture readings and prayers can practise at home and simply come forward when cued. The decision about how many to include in the rehearsal will be based on the comfort of everyone involved and, if using microphones, the comfort of everyone using the microphones.

- It is important to have one person responsible for cueing everyone, with support from others who will help make sure that the sheep, shepherds, and Wise Ones are moving when required.
- Any microphones on a stand should be placed where each monologue speaker will stand. The one or two sheep who speak could speak loudly, wear microphone headsets, or use a microphone also used by a monologue speaker.
- Arrange the stable scene before the service begins. In our congregation, a carpenter created a stable from old barn wood that we use as a background for the scene. The manger is placed in front of this, and lanterns with electric candles are hung in the stable window. Considering the questions of authenticity raised in the section below on costumes, create a backdrop as appropriate to your context, or just place a manger in the centre of the stage area, keeping the focus on the characters.
- The sheep who speak in this play could be dressed in sheep-like headgear or brown or grey toques with ears added. They could sit by the manger through the whole service or move up at the appropriate times. Our sheep choose to move on all fours once they're on the stage.
- You might decide to have the Wise Ones arrive at the manger during the singing of "Away in a Manger," or you might have them keep travelling around the sanctuary and arrive later. We usually just have everyone arrive at once during the singing. We know from clues in the Gospel of Matthew that the magi were not there on the night described in the Gospel of Luke, though we often just merge the two stories. But the most important part of the telling of this story is not the sequence of events; rather, it is the good news that is born in the midst of the story. What is the story your congregation needs to witness?

A Note about Costumes

Many churches have a stash of nativity costumes that are brought out and sorted each December in anticipation of preparing the manger scene. This display has been done for so many years that it feels quite detached from the historical, racial, and cultural reality that surrounded Jesus' Middle Eastern birth and Jewish ethnicity and traditions. The weeks leading up to the pageant of Jesus' birth provide an opportunity to delve into the real historical and cultural background, which can open hearts and minds to the ways the central characters of the story have been made White in much of North American and European culture, and uncover the harm that has been caused by that.

A sermon or two might explore the reality that Jesus was not a White male, as he is too often portrayed. Use the sermon time and children's story time to talk about who the first-century Jesus

was—what he might have looked like, what he ate, what kind of house he might have lived in, and how his political ideas fit with others' ideas in his community.

- Unlike central figures of other faith groups, Jesus is portrayed in many cultural and racial forms, which shows that Jesus is not only *not* White, but also that Jesus the Christ is transcendent. Instead of the costumes you've been using for years, why not consider using a costume that reflects your own context and the cultures within your congregation? Who would the shepherds be in today's society? Who would be the unexpected Wise Ones coming from afar? What kind of lodging would Mary and Joseph find in your community? Who might open a door for them or offer them a room?
- People of various ages might be asked to research life in the Middle East and discover what we know about clothing in the first century of the Common Era, then look through the costumes you have to determine their appropriateness, discarding or repurposing some as needed. Have the researchers consider (and then also ask the congregation) these questions:
 - What would you wear in a desert climate? Why?
 - What would protect you from the sun and sand?
 - What would you wear on your feet?
 - How would you obtain your clothes?
 - From what materials would the clothes be made?
 - What colour clothing would you wear? What would be used to dye the clothing?
- Check out the Worship webpages on The United Church of Canada website, www.united-church.ca/worship-liturgical-season, to find ideas for intergenerational and intercultural ways to tell the Christmas story. See, for example, [In Story and Song: Intergenerational Christmas Service](http://www.united-church.ca/worship-liturgical-season/christmas) (www.united-church.ca/worship-liturgical-season/christmas). You can also find profiles of some of the characters in this pageant in the Advent Unwrapped [Story and Activity Cards](http://www.united-church.ca/worship-theme/advent-unwrapped) (www.united-church.ca/worship-theme/advent-unwrapped). Also watch for the posting in November of a blog about anti-Semitism, an issue that is often overlooked (www.united-church.ca/blogs/round-table).

Cast

Speaking Parts

All roles can be played by anyone. Monologues vary in length to allow for presenters' comfort levels. The monologues do not need to be memorized. The scripts can be displayed on a card or music stand to be read by the presenter (though practised ahead of time).

- 1 or 2 sheep: one line repeated throughout the play
- Mary: monologue
- Joseph: monologue
- Shepherd: monologue
- Wise One: monologue
- Innkeeper: monologue

Reading Parts

These scriptures could be read from any version of the Bible you typically use in worship, or you might use the “easy” versions for younger readers provided in the script. They could be shared by one reader or up to five readers. Do you have someone in your congregation who uses American Sign Language (ASL)? Why not invite them to sign the scriptures as they are read?

- Luke 1:26–38
- Luke 2:8–16
- Luke 2:1–7
- Matthew 1:18–25
- Matthew 2:1–12

The following could be shared by two or more worship leaders of any age. The parts are marked 1 and 2 to indicate shared voicing of pieces.

- Call to Worship
- Lighting the Advent Wreath
- Prayer of the Day
- Prayers of the People
- Commissioning and Benediction

Non-Speaking Parts

There can be as many of each of these parts as you wish, or in a smaller congregation they might be imagined and gestured to by the person doing the monologue for each character type.

- Shepherds
- Wise Ones
- Angels

Other Roles

Make sure to include roles for anyone who doesn't want to dress up, speak, or be on stage, such as

- Greeters
- Offering collectors
- Stagehands
- Costume helpers

Gathering and Praise

Greeting

Come gather today in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit.

Gathering Hymn

“Go, Tell It on the Mountain” (VU 43)

Welcome and Announcements

Call to Worship

- 1: When life is messy and not going well,
2: remember that God is with you and come to worship.
- 1: When people are blaming you for something you haven't done,
2: remember that God is with you and come spend time in God's community.
- 1: When you step in the muck or hit your thumb with a hammer,
2: take a deep breath and remember that God is with you.
- 1: Come find comfort today in this gathering of God's people.

All: We know that God is with us. That's why we're here to worship.

Lighting the Advent Wreath

Use the candle for the appropriate Sunday from the Advent liturgy you are using this year.

Prayer of the Day

Compassionate God,
sometimes life is messy.
Sometimes we feel frightened, angry, confused,
excited or frustrated, happy or sad,
delighted or nervous,
and sometimes just discombobulated.
Sometimes we don't know what to feel.
Give us a sign that it won't last forever.
Remind us that a feeling is just a temporary thing,
but you are always there for us, no matter what we are feeling,
no matter how messy life gets.
You are our God, and we are not alone.
Thanks be to you, forever and ever. Amen.

Hymn

“Sing Till Sundown, Hum Your Joy” (VU 78) or “Joy to the World” (VU 59)

Hearing God's Word

Scripture: Luke 1:26–38

It was the sixth month of the year,
when the angel Gabriel came to visit a young woman named Mary.
Mary lived in the town of Nazareth in Galilee.
She was engaged to a man named Joseph.
The angel said to Mary, "Greetings, beautiful Mary. God is with you."
But Mary was confused. "Who was this? Why was he saying these things to her?"
The angel continued, "Do not be afraid, Mary. God has chosen you to do something special.
You are going to have a baby, and it will be God's child.
You will name him, Jesus, which means 'God saves us.'
This baby of yours will be a great person.
He will be called the Son of God.
He will be the ruler of his people forever and ever."
Mary was still confused. "How can this be? I'm not yet married."
The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come to you. This will be God's holy child.
Nothing is impossible for God."
Then Mary nodded and said, "Here I am. I'm ready. Let it be just as you say."
Then the angel left.

(Adapted and written by Susan Lukey)

Mary, with her cloak wrapped tightly around her, walks up on to the stage.

Mary's Monologue: This is a disaster. It was so amazing and so awesome when the angel came to me. I was overwhelmed with wonder. I felt as if I could do anything. But now the reality is setting in. What will Joseph say? What will my family say? What will the community say? How could God do this to me? I think I'm having a panic attack! *(she takes several quick shallow breaths)* Oh dear, I said "Yes" to this. *(her breaths get quieter and slower)* What will Joseph say? Will he abandon me? *(her breathing speeds up again)* I really think I'm having a panic attack!

*One or two sheep come up to Mary, brush against her, and say,
Baa! God is with you; you are not alone.*

Mary calms down as she pats the lambs and smiles, and they leave together.

Hymn

"Mary, Woman of the Promise" (VU 16) or "Hope is a Star" (VU 7)

Scripture: Matthew 1:18–25

This is how the birth of Jesus happened.
Mary and Joseph were engaged but they were not yet married.
Mary told Joseph that she was pregnant with God's child.
Joseph was a good man and he didn't want to hurt Mary.
But he was also confused and upset.
Then an angel came to Joseph in a dream and said,

“Joseph, son of David, don’t be afraid to take Mary as your wife.
Her baby is God’s child. It’s true.
When her son is born, name him Jesus.
He will also be called ‘Emmanuel.’ That means ‘God is with us.’”
When Joseph woke up from his dream, he welcomed Mary into his home.
Then, when her baby was born, he named him Jesus.

(Adapted and written by Susan Lukey)

Joseph enters, leaning on his staff.

Joseph’s Monologue: My life is a nightmare right now. I was working so hard to get ready for the wedding, building a house and all of the furniture that Mary and I would need. Then she comes to tell me she is pregnant. What am I supposed to say to that? She says the child is from God. What am I supposed to say to that? I have been so angry. I love Mary. I want to care for her. But how could she do this to me? (He pauses.) And then this dream—telling me it will be alright. Okay. I’m a good person. I’ll do what God asks, but my life still feels like a nightmare right now.

*One or two sheep come up to Joseph, brush against him, and say,
Baa! God is with you; you are not alone.*

Joseph pats the lambs, shrugs, and gives a big sigh, and they leave together.

Piano, Voice, or Instrument Solo

By one of the children or youth
or another hymn, such as “O Ancient Love” (VU 17)

Scripture: Luke 2:8–16

Near Bethlehem, there were shepherds living in the fields.
They kept guard over their flocks of sheep each night.
Suddenly the angel of the Lord appeared before them.
The shepherds were afraid,
but the angel said,
“Do not be afraid.
I bring you good news, joyful news.
Today in Bethlehem the Saviour has been born.
Go and find the baby lying in a manger.”
Suddenly the sky was filled with angels who sang:
“Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and peace to everyone on earth.”
When the angels had left, the shepherds hurried to Bethlehem.
They found Mary and Joseph and the baby in the manger.
When the shepherds left the stable, they began to tell everyone about Jesus’ birth.
They shouted out praise to God as they returned to the fields.
Mary listened carefully and watched carefully.
She wanted to remember everything that happened that night.

And Mary treasured all of this in her heart.
(Adapted and written by Susan Lukey)

A group of shepherds walks, talking excitedly about going to Bethlehem, needing to find the baby. One stops as others continue down the aisle.

Shepherd's Monologue: *(clearly super excited)* It was amazing. No! Awesome. No! Tremendously outstanding. Astonishing, marvellous, inspiring, remarkable, incredible, surprising! *(takes a deep breath, trying to calm down)* The angels. Hundreds of them. No, thousands of them. *(speaks faster and faster)* The sky was full of them. I was there and still I don't believe it. And then one spoke and told of us of God's peace. And then told us about a baby from God, in Bethlehem. And that we should go and find the baby. And that's what we're doing. Going to Bethlehem. I just can't believe it. It's so amazing. But wait a minute. We left all the sheep in the field *(turns back to the field then back to follow the other shepherds)* Yikes, no one is watching the sheep! *(keeps looking repeatedly back to the field then forward to Bethlehem)* I don't know what to do.



One or two sheep come up to the shepherd, brush against him, and say, Baa! God is with you; you are not alone.

The shepherd calms down as he pats the lambs and says, Yes, little lamb(s), you're so good at helping me remember that!

The shepherd and lambs leave together following the other shepherds.

Hymn

"Joy Is Now in Every Place" (VU 45) or "O Come All You Faithful" (VU 60, verses 1, 3, and 4)

Scripture: Matthew 2:1–12

King Herod was king in Jerusalem when Jesus was born.
Three wise travellers from the East came looking for the baby.
They were following a star.
They asked King Herod to help them find the baby.
"Where is the child who has been born, the one who will be the new king?
We saw his star in the east and we have come to worship him."
When King Herod heard this, he was frightened.
He called together his priests and scribes and asked where the child would be born.
Then Herod gave the wise travellers directions to Bethlehem.
He said to them, "Go, find the child, and when you find him, let me know where he is.
I want to worship him, too."
Then the wise ones set off again.
They followed the star to Bethlehem.

The star stopped over a house.
The Wise Ones went in and found the baby and his mother.
They knelt down and worshipped Jesus.
Then they gave three gifts to the baby: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.
A message came to them in a dream.
They were told that King Herod wanted to kill the baby.
So they didn't go back to Herod.
They went home another way.
(Adapted and written by Susan Lukey)

A group of Wise Ones (two, three, five, twelve, or more) enter. Each is pointing a different way, and they are saying, "This way! No, this way! I'm sure it's this way!" One stops as the rest continue on.

Wise One's Monologue: You should have heard the arguments. We should go this way. No, the star is telling us to go this way. No, I'm sure it is this way. Talk about confusion. And then what to bring for a gift for a royal baby. Gold, frankincense, myrrh. I thought it should be a soft blanket, stitched with gold embroidery, of course. Yup—there were arguments before we left. Confusion about which way to go, confusion about what gift to bring. It's a wonder we even got on the road. Somehow, we made it to Jerusalem. We were welcomed into the presence of King Herod because, of course, we are important people. But somehow, I don't trust him. Yes, he gave us a possible location for the child. But he can't be too happy about this baby. It doesn't seem to be his son. He said to return and tell him about the baby, but I don't trust his motives. It's all quite confusing. I'm not sure how we're going to make sense of all this. Now, which way is Bethlehem? Looks like my friends have decided which way to go, though they aren't usually right about anything. They'll need my input. (shakes his head) Confusing, confusing, confusing!



One or two sheep come up to the Wise One, brush against him, and say, Baa! God is with you; you are not alone.

The Wise One sighs, relaxes, and strolls off after the other Wise Ones, and says, One step at a time. Just one step at a time.

Responding to God's Word

Hymn

"Do You Hear What I Hear?" (Regney/Shayne) (available through Licensing)
or "What Child Is This?" (VU 74)
or a Solo or Choir Anthem

Scripture: Luke 2:1–7

In those days an order went out from Emperor Augustus.
He said that all the world should pay taxes.
Everyone went to their own hometowns to pay the tax.
Joseph went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee
to the city of Bethlehem
because that was the place where his grandparents came from.
He was engaged to Mary, and Mary was expecting a child.
So, they travelled together to Bethlehem.
When they got there, it was time for the baby to be born.
Mary gave birth to her first son.
She wrapped him in a blanket and laid him in a manger
because there was no room in the inn.
(Adapted and written by Susan Lukey)

Innkeeper stands on stage with lantern and yawns.

Innkeeper's Monologue: What do people expect? That they can just come knocking at my door anytime of the day or night and find a room? Especially with the census going on and all these extra people. What do they think I am, a miracle worker? I was just tucked into my bed, everything done for the day, and then I heard it again. Knock, knock, knock. It was a young couple. She was pregnant and she was in labour. What was I to do? I had no room. I told them that. But tough as I try to be, I've got a soft heart when it comes to babies. So, I took them to the barn. I have no clue what they're going to do tomorrow. But for tonight they have a warm spot...a bit stinky but still warm. I'm heading back to bed. *(Shakes his head)* I do feel sorry for that young couple, though! Having their baby in a barn!



*One or two sheep come up to the innkeeper, brush against him, and say, Baa! God is with **them; they** are not alone.*

Innkeeper smiles and says,

That's right! Now you get back to the barn and remind them of that!

(Yawns and heads off to bed)

Invitation to Join the Nativity Scene

- 1: During the singing of "Away in a Manger," we'd like to invite you to find your place in the manger scene.
- 2: Today we've heard from some of the key characters in the story, who have shared with us what they felt and what they experienced on that first Christmas.

- 1: Which character fits for you today? What place would you like to take in the nativity scene today?
- 2: If you'd like to, there are some costumes here that you can put on. Or you can come as you are to the nativity.
- 1: If you prefer to stay where you are and imagine your place, that's fine too.
- 2: Just remember that we all have a place in this story. We are all welcome at the manger.



Hymn

“Away in a Manger” (VU 69) (You might repeat the whole hymn more than once to allow everyone to find their place.)

During the singing of the hymn, anyone who would like to may take a place in the nativity scene. The main characters who have spoken have already taken their spots, and now others can join in. We have never worried about how many of each character we have had. Sometimes it has worked out that we have two Marys or two Josephs or three of one and two of the other. Everyone just gathers around the manger. Make sure a baby comes with either Mary or Joseph and is placed in the manger.

The Sheep—Once More

*The little sheep once more, after the hymn ends, come to the manger and say,
That's Emmanuel; that's God with us. We are not alone!*

Offering

- 1: Our offering is the way we say “Thanks” to God for the gift of Jesus. With our gifts, we offer our gratitude that God-is-with-us; we are not alone.
- 2: With these gifts, we are able, as a congregation, to share the good news with others. Through these gifts, we can help others know that God is with them; they are not alone.
- 1: As we sing this hymn, let us present our gifts.

Offering Hymn

“Jesus, Our Brother Kind and Good” (VU 56)

The offering is collected during the singing of the hymn. If practical in your context and for the ages involved, all those forming the nativity stay in the scene right through to the end of the service. Other options are for only the main speakers to remain and everyone else returns to their seats during the collection of the offering or everyone in the nativity returns to their seats during the collection of the offering, leaving only the baby in the manger.

Prayers of the People and The Lord's Prayer

The petitions for this prayer were created from ideas given by a group of children and youth on one of the Sundays prior to this service. Please add petitions from the hearts of children, youth, and adults in your congregation.

Share the American Sign Language motions for peace and love and invite people to sign those words in the responses below. Learn the signs at www.handspeak.com.

- 1: Loving God, we are here to celebrate and to receive the story of the birth of Jesus. Yet, even as we celebrate, we know that there are many in need here and around the world.
- 2: We think of those who won't be with family or friends for Christmas, those who are sad and grieving for a loved one, and all who are facing struggles and challenges of many kinds. And so we pray...

May all the world know your love and peace, O God.

- 1: We think of (*name a current local or world situation—e.g., a place where there has been a recent disaster*),
And so we pray...

May all the world know your love and peace, O God.

- 2: We think of (*name a current local or world situation—e.g., the people who fight for human rights and dignity around the world*)
And so we pray...

May all the world know your love and peace, O God.

- 1: We pray for the earth, and especially for the polar bears and other animals who are feeling the effects of climate change. May we, the people of the earth, find a path to heal the damage to our climate and to our earth. And so we pray...

May all the world know your love and peace, O God.

- 2: We pray for all animals, for wolverines, koalas, red pandas, and all the wonderful creatures you have made, O God.
And so we pray...

May all the world know your love and peace, O God.

- 1: We think of all who are sick today and all who are grieving. We think of those who don't have homes in which to live, and those who aren't safe from abuse and violence at home.

We think of those who are lonely and those who are being bullied.
And so we pray...

May all the world know your love and peace, O God.

- 2: We think of those who are experiencing so many emotions this Christmas, especially those who are not feeling merry or joyous.
And so we pray...

May all the world know your love and peace, O God.

- 1: We think of all women who are pregnant and all couples who are expecting a baby.
We know they have worries as well as excitement.
And so we pray...

May all the world know your love and peace, O God.

- 2: We can have so many different memories and emotions at Christmas.
Like those there at the first Christmas, we can be happy, sad, joyful, angry, peaceful, and frustrated.
Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, the Wise Ones, and the innkeeper all discovered you were with them.
They found your peace when Jesus was born.
In the same way, may we here
and people everywhere
find peace in knowing that you are with us, today and always.
For Jesus came as Emmanuel, God-with-us.
For this we give thanks
and we pray the words that Jesus taught us:

Our Father, who art in heaven...

Hymn

“Good Christian Friends, Rejoice” (VU 35)

Commissioning and Benediction

- 1: Go, make sure that you help create a world where everyone has full stomachs and a safe place to sleep.
- 2: Go, make sure that everyone knows that God’s love is with them, no matter what mess they are in.
- 1: And remember!

2: God's love is big love.
 God's arms can hold everyone in the world.
 God's heart keeps our hearts warm with compassion.

Sheep come to stage once more and say,
Baa! God is with you! You are not alone! No matter how messy it gets!

All Sing

Chorus of "Go, Tell It on the Mountain" (VU 43) *(repeat several times)*