# “Blue Christmas” or “Longest Night” Advent Service

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

## God Gathers Us

Musical Prelude

Quiet instrumental Christmas music (live or prerecorded)[[1]](#footnote-1)

Words of Welcome/Introductions

* Practical hospitality: welcome visitors, give a clear announcement about the location of washrooms, any accessibility equipment (e.g., elevator, ramps, location of accessible washroom, hearing loop, sensory break room) and any resources for children/families.
* “Make space for grace” in grief: begin the service by inviting people to feel their feelings and to take care of themselves however they need to as the service progresses. Have you prepared any pamphlets or digital resources about grief/loss that congregants can take home with them? Do you have a contact list for community groups, the local food bank, domestic violence shelters, mental health crisis support, and online resources that you can share with those present? The church cannot provide everything that people in pain may need, but we can be part of a supportive network of care.
* Help neurodivergent or anxious congregants to feel more comfortable by giving an overview of the service structure. If you have chosen the intergenerational version of the service, you might also share a few words of welcome for the children/youth present, and put their adults at ease (and simultaneously remind congregants) by describing how your church offers an intentional welcome to families and expects young children to act in developmentally appropriate ways. Various noises, movement, questions, and enthusiastic participation in the service is not only tolerated; it is encouraged!

Statement of Purpose/Call to Worship

(Reader 1 or Worship Leader)

All around us we see festive Christmas lights and beautiful displays of trees and ornaments, special foods and gifts; everywhere we turn, we enounter people and places carrying an unrelenting message that shouts at top volume, “TIS THE SEASON TO BE JOLLY!” Yet we recognize that the month of December is also difficult for many people, for many different reasons. Christmas may not be as joyful for us as it seems to be for others.

(Reader 2)

As the nights grow longer, sadness and emptiness, loneliness and pain intensify in the hearts of many people. In this season of longest nights, some of us struggle to put into words what it is that causes us to feel blue. But whether we can describe how we are feeling, or not, the reality is that for some of us gathered here, a loved one has died, and we are grieving.

(Reader 1)

For others, a dear friend or family member has moved away. Maybe you’ve lost a job, or your dream was crushed, or your health has declined, or your pain is unrelenting, or maybe you are simply exhausted by the effort it takes to navigate around the ableist attitudes that are deeply entrenched in so many of our communities and churches. Perhaps this Advent season has left you feeling as desolate as the December landscape, and your heart wonders if you’ll ever sense God’s hope and peace again; maybe, after the year you’ve just endured, joy and love seem like alien concepts, like ideas you don’t even recognize.

(Reader 2)

Maybe you are feeling worried, trapped, insecure, or lonely. Perhaps you are grieving what might have been, but will not be, or mourning what used to be, but is no longer possible. Maybe you simply need a place of quiet and calm, a safe place to reflect and to be centered. A safe place to grieve, without any pressure to “pull yourself together” or any expectation to “put on a brave front.” This church, this intentional gathering to “make space for grace” is a place for each of us to find real rest, the kind of rest that the Holy Spirit offers us, rest for our bodies, our minds, and our souls, rest in an otherwise hectic and often overwhelming season.

(Reader 1)

This next hour we’ll spend together—this night of worship, in the midst of our sorrow and suffering—this is holy, blessed time. This sanctuary is a safe place, a supportive place, and you are welcomed in the fullness of your brokenness and pain. You are among friends, here. And best of all, you are in the presence of the God who tenderly accompanies each of us, the Triune God who is attentive to all who suffer, and who longs to comfort us and to mend our wounded hearts with God’s own unrelenting, patiently waiting, never forsaking, “capital L Love.”

(Reader 2)

Whatever circumstances prompted you to attend this service, you are truly welcome here. Together, we offer this time of worship to Emmanuel, God-with-us, trusting that there is no pain that does not echo in God’s heart, no joy that does not come from God’s hand.[[2]](#footnote-2) Come, let us worship God together. Our opening hymn is from “Voices United,” number 34. Please rise in body or spirit, and join us as we sing together.

Opening Hymn VU34 “Come Now, O God of Peace/O So-So”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Opening Reading (Responsive)

This Christmas Season

Adapted by Lisa Waites from Amanda Udis-Kessler, 2024

One: This Christmas season, as others swarm the stores looking for bargains,

**Many: we sit at home, our bodies in too much pain for holiday shopping.**

One: This Christmas season, as carolers walk from house to house singing,

**Many: we struggle with sidewalks too broken up and stairs too steep for us to navigate them.**

One: This Christmas season, as others talk of hope, peace, joy, and love,

**Many: we are overwhelmed by our racing minds, troubled hearts, and haunted histories.**

One: This Christmas season, as others indulge in an extra slice of pie, spend on extravagant gifts, or join their colleagues at the local pub for festive drinks,

**Many: we wrestle with our addictions, sometimes successfully, sometimes not.**

One: This Christmas season, as people stare at holiday lights and decorations,

**Many: we know what it is like to be stared at because of how we look, talk, or act.**

One: This Christmas season, as families gather together,

**Many: we mourn broken relationships with those who have not understood us or shown us grace.**

One: This Christmas season, as fires are lit in cozy living rooms across the country,

Many: we struggle to find warmth in over-crowded shelters, or we shiver on the street.

One: This Christmas season may seem like it is intended for others, not for us.

Many: Yet we can still claim the holiday as our own, with all of its complications, regrets, sadnesses, and anger. May our joining together tonight ease our pain, remind us of our connections with others, and enable us to find peace, even if just for this little while.[[4]](#footnote-4)

## God Shapes Us Through the Word

Scripture Reading/Candle Lighting

(While music of VU55 plays quietly in the background, each reader will take their turn processing to the chancel microphone, proclaiming their assigned verses of scripture and the first portion of the liturgy, then lighting their sequentially assigned candle (first candle on the left is reader 1, next candle to the right is reader 2, etc) on the Communion table or in the Advent wreath. The reader will pause for a moment of silence, and conclude by reading the final portion of their assigned liturgy. Readers may recess to their respective pews as the congregation begins to sing the hymn (the congregation will remain seated); the congregational singing is also the cue for the next reader to process up to the chancel mic.)

(Worship Leader)

We call to mind those we especially miss at Christmas. We remember them by name in our hearts. We still hear their voices and celebrate our memories of them. We acknowledge and mourn losses suffered: the loss of relationship, the loss of stability, the unexpected changes in our lives, this year. We remember the many emotions and experiences of Christmas, both the memories that bring smiles to our faces, and those that stir fear or sadness in our hearts.

Christmas gatherings can trigger happy and traumatic memories alike. The holidays can prompt feelings of grief, anger, sadness, and pain. We may feel lonely or excluded by our family members or friends. Some relationships have been broken by conflict, distance, marital separation, or divorce; others have ended because of illness, disease, disability, or caregiver burnout; some relationships were forever changed by the suicide of a friend or loved one, or an untimely death from other causes. The constant pain we feel as a result of our losses may not be visible to the people around us, but our suffering is very real, and it is completely known by God.

We also make space for the grace of faith, remembering, even as we take this unwelcome journey through the valley of the shadow of death, that God has promised to never leave us or forsake us. We are grateful for the comforting presence of the Holy Spirit. We are thankful for the care of family and friends, near and far, and the support of those whom we’ve encountered at home, in our places of worship, at work, in our schools, and in our wider communities.

(Reader 1 reads Isaiah 58:6–12, then says)

When we are discouraged and in need of help, God promises to hear our call and to answer us. The Holy One is compassionate and kind, quick to respond, and delighted to satisfy our needs. God tenderly invites us into God’s own loving presence, rebuilding and repairing us as we learn to live out kingdom principles, helping to satisfy our neighbours’ needs and speaking out against injustice. God promises through the prophet, Isaiah, that our light shall rise in the darkness, and our gloom will be like the noonday sun. (Pause) God said, “Let there be light.”

**Many: And there was light.**

(The first candle is lit by INSERT NAME HERE, followed by a time of silence.)

(Reader 1 continues)

We remember Isaiah’s ancient words, that we will not be disgraced or abandoned. We will not be left to marinate in our shame. Through God’s everlasting faithfulness, we are treated with compassion and kindness. We are not forsaken. We can be rescued by God’s love—a love that is strong enough to completely heal our broken hearts and to gently mend our ragged souls.

(Verse 1 of VU 55 “In the Bleak Midwinter” is sung by the congregation)

(Reader 2 reads Psalm 27:1–6, then says)

When our journey is hardest, when the way ahead seems unclear; when we wonder if the tears will ever stop, we remember that God was faithful to our spiritual ancestors. David sang with a courageous heart, confident that God would preserve his life and deliver him from his enemies. When it seems like there are enemies camped all around us, and our circumstances seem desperately difficult, verging on hopeless, God says, “Let there be light,” And there was light.

(The second candle is lit by INSERT NAME HERE, followed by a time of silence.)

(Reader 2 continues)

We remember the paths we have taken in this life, paths through seasons of suffering and seasons of solace. As we reflect on where we’ve been, where we are now, and where life may take us in the future, like the Psalmist, we place ourselves into God’s loving hands, reminding ourselves, and each other, that God has promised to be our light and our salvation.

(Verse 2 of “In the Bleak Midwinter” is sung by the congregation)

(Reader 3 reads Philippians 2:5–11, then says)

In our seasons of suffering, we think of the apostle Paul, who reminds us that although Jesus Christ was filled with all the glory of God, he chose to empty himself; he chose to take on the limitations of human flesh; he chose to humble himself, to be *with* us. Jesus chose redemptive love for us over personal comfort, and he kept on choosing that self-giving love for humanity over and over again, all the way to his death on the cross and his resurrection from the grave. We are never left to endure discouraging circumstances, illness, grief, or pain alone! In *every* kind of suffering and heartache, Jesus journeys with us, faithfully shepherding and accompanying us through each season of our earthly lives, especially our seasons of suffering. (Pause) God says, “Let there be light,” **And there was light.**

(The third candle is lit by INSERT NAME HERE, followed by a time of silence.)

(Reader 3 continues)

We remember that even when we are at our worst, God does not abandon us. God has promised to *never* leave us or forsake us. In the midst of our sorrow and suffering, we are thankful for the faithful, loving example of Jesus, the One who rescues and redeems us, who tenderly remakes and restores.

(Verse 3 of “In the Bleak Midwinter” is sung by the congregation.)

(Reader 4 reads Matthew 1:18–25, then says)

As we look toward the future with tear-stained faces, worrying about what horrors the new year may bring, we can be encouraged by the words of Scripture. Emmanuel is the gift of God-with-us, through the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus freely offers abundant grace and eduring peace to each of us. (Pause) Even as we suffer, we do not lose all hope, because God says: “let there be light!”

**Many: And there is light. The light of Christ still shines in our hearts; nothing and no one can ever overcome or extinquish it.**

(The fourth candle is lit by INSERT NAME HERE, followed by a time of silence.)

(Reader 4 continues)

We remember the costly love that God has demonstrated by sharing Emmanuel with us, and in Advent, we anticipate the birth of Jesus with gratitude. Matthew’s gospel reminds us that when we are lonely, confused, misunderstood, traumatized, anxious, excluded, or overwhelmed, all is not lost! God is still working behind the scenes, fulfilling God’s promises, patiently mending all willing hearts, trading beauty for ashes and healing for heartbreak, working in and through us to bring the good news of God’s redemptive, peaceful reign to all of creation.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Verse 4 of “In the Bleak Midwinter” is sung by the congregation.

A Communal Prayer for Hope and Wholeness (Responsive)

One: Let us pray together in word and in song, honestly acknowledging our circumstances before our Creator and humbly asking God to renew our hope and to restore our lives. Out of the depths we cry to you, God: **Many: make space for your grace in us, we pray.**

(You could choose to open this time of reflective prayer by singing together the Scriptural setting of Psalm 25, In You, We Hope, We Trust by Lisa Waites © 2024.)

**(Sung by all): To you, O Lord, we lift our souls; in you alone we trust;**

**O let us not be put to shame, in you, we hope, we trust,**

**Your steadfast love, it covers us.**

**Help us to know your paths, O Lord, lead us in your truth;**

**All your ways are faithfulness, as you teach your humble ones,**

**that your covenant is love.** [[6]](#footnote-6)

(Worship Leader, please pause briefly each time you see … and feel free to adapt the prayer for your particular congregational context.)

One: We come to you overwhelmed by our pain tonight …

We are bewildered by our brokenheartedness, and gutted by our grief …

Some of us are exhausted by our daily encounters with embedded ableism, while others have not yet noticed how profoundly inaccessible our own churches can be …

One: Out of the depths we cry to you, God—

**Many:** **make space for your grace in us, we pray.**

One: Real hospitality requires hard work and soft hearts, along with patience, an attitude of humility, and a willingness to embrace discomfort …

All too often though, we reject the discomfort that change requires, and we cling instead to the familiar pleasures of our dysfunctional old patterns, even when we know they are no longer serving us, our loved ones, our communities, or our churches well; even when we know in our heart of hearts that they are now causing significant harm …

These dysfunctional old patterns do help us to avoid the awkwardness of “doing things differently”, but it also allows our *fear* to overcome our *faith*, instead of living in the confidence that, no matter how difficult our circumstances may seem, through the power of the Holy Spirit, our *faith* will overcome our *fear* …

Faithful God, help us to courageously answer your gospel invitation; strengthen our hearts, encouraging us to “take the leap of faith” tonight, choosing to “fail forward” by deliberately offering others more meaningful hospitality, and by intentionally widening our welcome …

One: Out of the depths we cry to you, God—

**Many:** **make space for your grace in us, we pray.**

One: Some of us carry chronic illnesses and disabilities …

Some of us are disappointed in, or feel betrayed by, our changing bodies or minds …

Others have taken our robust physical or mental health for granted, for many years …

We carry deep hurts inflicted on us by others …

We know that we too have acted wrongly, inflicting hurt and harm on others …

Creation itself cries out in pain, as the planet suffers from our destructive violence, our endless wars, our hyper-consumption, and our seemingly insatiable human appetites for power and possessions …

As a species, we so desperately hunger for that which will never truly satisfy us!

One: Out of the depths we cry to you, God—

**Many: make space for your grace in us, we pray.**

One: True contentment and real peace are only found in you, O God. And so, we lay bare our hearts, confessing to you our deepest regrets, our most shameful sorrows …

We bring you our loneliness and our grief …

We are weary of our depression and our despair …

We are weighed down by old traumas and fresh fears …

We are worn out by our worry and our weeping …

One: Out of the depths we cry to you, God—

**All:** **make space for your grace in us, we pray.**

You hear our cries, O God. You recognize the depth of our suffering, and you offer us the healing salve of your Love. We acknowledge that we are desperate for your peace, your solace, your hope, your companionship, your compassion. Please help us to experience your healing presence tonight; wrap us in the warmth of your embrace, and rekindle hope within us. Soothe our wounded hearts and grant peace for our troubled minds, we pray. Amen.

(You could choose to close this time of reflective prayer by singing together the Scriptural setting of Psalm 25, In You, We Hope, We Trust by Lisa Waites © 2024.)

**(Sung by all): To you, O Lord, we lift our souls; in you alone we trust;**

**O let us not be put to shame, in you, we hope, we trust,**

**Your steadfast love, it covers us. Help us to know your paths, O**

**Lord, lead us in your truth; All your ways are faithfulness, as you**

**teach your humble ones, that your covenant is love.[[7]](#footnote-7)**

Reflection/Story Time

(If this is an intergenerational service, you might like to read one of the suggested children’s stories instead of preparing a sermon; if it is an adults-only service, then the worship leader might like to offer the following package of liturgical readings and responsive music as a reflective, multi-sensory replacement for a traditional sermon.

Children’s stories that are appropriate for an intergenerational “Blue Christmas” service:

* *The Christmas Miracle of Jonathan Toomey*by Susan Wojciechowski, illustrated by P.J. Lynch (Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press, 1995). Some editions of the book include a bonus CD recording of the late James Earl Jones narrating the story; this recording would function very well as an alternative sermon/reflection for an all-ages service focused on loss and grief. Although it was written for elementary-aged children, this story will captivate listeners of all ages. Reading time: 20–25 mins.
* *All is Well: The Miracle of Christmas in July* by Frank Peretti, illustrated by Gary Glover (Brentwood, TN: Integrity Publishers, 2002). This story is narrated by a boy named Daniel, who is grieving the recent death of his father. Daniel tries to sell some of his belongings to his neighbours in an effort to raise money and prevent himself and his grieving mother from being evicted. The neighbours respond with unexpected generosity, Daniel’s prayers are answered, and his mother’s hope is renewed through the discovery of a precious homemade Christmas ornament. Reading time: 15–20 mins.
* *Grandad’s Prayers of the Earth*by Douglas Wood, illustrated by P.J. Lynch (Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press, 1999). A boy walks with his grandfather in the woods, and during their time together in nature, the boy is taught to listen for the prayers of the earth offered by the trees and rocks, waters and wind, birds and animals, and people, too. When the grandfather dies, the boy stops praying for a long time, until one day he goes for a walk and realizes that Creation is praying around him. He joins that prayer, offering God his thanks for the beauty of nature and the gift of his grandad. While not focused on Advent/Christmas, the message of grace and faithfulness is apparent in this beautifully illustrated book. Reading time: approximately 10 mins.)

1) A Reading of “The Blessing You Should Not Tell Me” from Jan Richardson’s *The Cure for Sorrow: A Book of Blessings for Times of Grief.*[[8]](#footnote-8)

2) Hymn: VU#614 “In Suffering Love” verses 1–3, 5.

3) A Reading of “When Life Feels Out of Control” from Kate Bowler’s book, *Have a Beautiful, Terrible Day! Daily Meditations for the Ups, Downs, & In-Betweens.[[9]](#footnote-9)*

4) Hymn: MV#147 “God, Help Us to Treasure” verses 1–3, repeat vs 1 if desired.

5) A Reading of “Lament Psalm Nineteen” from Anne Weems’ book, *Psalms of Lament*.*[[10]](#footnote-10)*

6) Hymn: VU#6 “A Candle Is Burning” vs 1–4.

## We Respond to God

An Act of Congregational Remembering and Response

(Worship Leader: invite everyone to pray the following unison prayer from their seats, and then come up to the table at the front of the chancel in family groupings or by rows/sections of pews. Each person will be invited to take an unlit candle or a tea light from the basket, to light it from the Christ candle (or turn the switches on if you are using a battery-operated version), then place the lit candle into the holders provided on the table while offering a silent prayer. Quiet music will play in the background.*[[11]](#footnote-11)* Ushers can help people with mobility needs as requested, and also to assist with lighting/placing candles. It is a respectful practice for ushers to *ask first* before rendering assistance; congregants of all ages/ability levels who may seem to be struggling might just need a little extra time to complete the task independently.)

**All: O God, we light this candle, remembering our loss.**

**We light this candle, acknowledging our pain.**

**We light this candle, asking for your comfort and healing.**

**We light this candle, needing to be surrounded by your love and peace.**

**We light this candle in grief, and also in hope. Amen.**

After congregants have all had an opportunity to light a candle and offer a silent prayer, and everyone has returned to their seats, the worship leader may offer this closing prayer alone, or invite the congregation to pray it together.

Prayer of Response

Gracious God, no matter how challenging our circumstances, you faithfully offer us redemption and rescue. We are especially grateful for the gift of Emmanuel, God-with-us, who accompanies us through seasons of suffering and solace, despair and delight. You have given us your Holy Spirit to strengthen and guide us, and we are thankful for that comforting presence. Thank you for “making space for your grace” in our hearts tonight. As we leave this sanctuary and go back out into your world, help us to live more fully in the light of your love, sending back the glorious song, which now the angels sing. Amen.

## God Sends Us

Sending Hymn

VU#44 “It Came Upon the Midnight Clear” vs 1–4

Words of Blessing and Sending[[12]](#footnote-12)

Musical Postlude

There will be refreshments in the narthex following the service, but you are welcome to linger in the sanctuary for as long as you’d like: there is plenty of time, so please, don’t feel that you need to rush. If you’d like someone to pray with you, or you’d like to talk about your specific circumstances with someone, our Minister and Prayer Team members would be honoured to listen to your concerns. Whatever sorrow you brought with you into worship this evening, sharing it with another person can help to lighten your emotional load. Scripture tells us to “carry each other’s burdens” (Galatians 6:2), and we take that biblical instruction seriously. Will you allow us to pray with you tonight?

1. If you are looking for prerecorded music for the prelude, “An Acoustic Christmas” (featuring piano and cello) by Callis Fox Records, 2008, “A Special Christmas” by the St. Paul’s Cathedral Choir, and John McDermott’s “Christmas Memories” (EMI Canada) are all seasonal collections that would be appropriate to set a reflective, gentle musical mood. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This Statement of Purpose has been adapted by Lisa Waites from a Call to Worship in *Celebrate God’s Presence: A Book of Services for The United Church of Canada* (Etobicoke, ON: United Church Publishing House, 2000), 99-100.  [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Depending on preferred length of hymn, you could sing vs. 1 “Come now, O God of hope,” vs 2 “peace,” vs 3 “love,” and vs 4 could go back to peace, or you might try singing a verse in the original Korean, which is provided in the hymnal. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Adapted slightly by Lisa Waites (with permission) from “This Christmas Season” written by Amanda Udis-Kessler, who has given her kind permission for United Church of Canada congregations to use this responsive reading (gratis) for non-commercial worship purposes during Advent, 2024. For other use of her prayers, hymns, and liturgies, please contact the author by emailing amanda@amandaudiskessler.com [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The Candle-Lighting liturgy has been adapted by Lisa Waites from *Celebrate God’s Presence,* 101-102. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Suggested format for this Scriptural service music is verse, chorus, verse (ending with “your steadfast love, it covers us” and then an optional two measure instrumental outro, using the pickup to measure) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Suggested format for this Scriptural service music is verse, chorus, verse (ending with “your steadfast love, it covers us” and then an optional two measure outro, using the music of measures 19–20). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *The Cure for Sorrow: A Book of Blessings for Times of Grief* (Orlando, FL: Wanton Gospeller Press, 2016), 53–55. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Have a Beautiful, Terrible Day! Daily Meditations for the Ups, Downs, & In-Betweens* (New York, NY: Convergent, 2024), 52–53. You might also choose to read the scripture (Romans 8:38–39), the introduction to the piece, and the reflection prompt that accompanies the reading, after you have purchased your own copy of the and secured the publisher’s permission to use it in this way. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Psalms of Lament* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 37–38. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. “Rescue” by Lauren Daigle would be a powerful musical selection to have playing quietly in the background. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Worship Leaders are welcome to offer an extemporaneous blessing here, or to use Sarah Bessey’s powerful words in “A Benediction” from her book *A Rhythm of Prayer: A Collection of Meditations for Renewal* (New York, NY: Convergent Press, 2021), 142–146. If you don’t use Bessey’s work here, you might also consider incorporating her words as the final component of the Pastoral Reflection. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)