# Lessons and Carols: Christmas Eve Service

*There is perhaps no other worship service in the year as steeped in local tradition as Christmas Eve. Repeating something without thinking is a* habit*; reflecting on whether to repeat it, and deciding to, is a* practice*. Our best liturgical traditions, as practices, can root us and remind us of God’s steady and loving presence in our lives. Well in advance, a discerning worship leader can help congregations reflect on this difference.*

*The welcome challenge of Christmas Eve services is how to offer worship that is meaningful for those familiar with your community and its practices, and for those who are not. Encounter with mystery—fostered liturgically in music, silence, and light—is a rare experience today. We don’t always recognize our need for deeper spiritual connection, but the recounting of the nativity story, and connecting it to our time and place, is a perfect opportunity.*

*However your church worships on this evening, Christmas Eve also affords a chance to demonstrate the best of church culture: hospitality, inclusivity, expansive thinking, intergenerational and intercultural community, and genuine spiritual experience. The welcome begins in the narthex/foyer, with greeters, but continues throughout worship. The bulletin can include helpful, small-print descriptions (a rubric) of what is happening, and of what the congregation usually does (e.g., sitting, standing). Announcements should be kept to a minimum, and invitations to join the congregation again in worship should be warm and friendly.*

*The following liturgy capitalizes on music and story by adapting the Lessons and Carols format beloved by many Anglican congregations. It’s a worship format that allows people of all church experience levels to participate, and especially to include the offerings of lay readers and musicians. In congregations with multiple Christmas Eve services, this format also offers a welcome change.*

## Gathering as God’s People

**Declaration of Good News**

*A brief reading of scripture sets the theme ad tone of worship. The “heralding” of good news is enhanced by occurring unannounced (e.g., Isaiah 9:6–7, Luke 1:30–33).*

**Processional Carol:** O Come, All Ye Faithful (*VU* 60) *or* Once in Royal David’s City (*VU* 62)

*Churches whose regular practice is not to process will want to discuss whether/how to do this. Even in small churches, the effect is celebratory and exciting. Someone might bring in the Bible and the Christ candle at the front of the procession, followed by the choir and the presiders.*

**Call to Worship**

Like the shepherds, we come to the stable,

uncertain of what we have heard and seen,

**longing to hear a word of peace and joy.**

Like the wise ones, we have journeys to make,

gifts to offer, and hope in our hearts,

**that this world can change for the better.**

Here, in the stillness of a winter’s night,

we gather to share the light of Christ,

a light that shines in the nightfall.

**We gather in the wonder of this night**

**to share our joy and thanks for new life.**

**Lighting the Advent Wreath**

Advent, the season of preparing, is nearly over.

Our waiting is nearly finished.

Now is a time of fulfillment and celebration.

**In the darkness of night, we give thanks for light.**

We light a candle of hope:

hope for ourselves, and for God’s beloved world.

We light a candle of peace:

peace in our hearts, and on earth.

We light a candle of joy:

joy to the world, and within our whole being.

We light a candle of love:

the promise of God’s love for us, and for all creation.

And now the hour has come and the season is fulfilled.

**We light the Christ candle,**

**the light of the world, the light of possibility. Amen.**

**Sign of Peace**

*The presider may want to describe, very briefly, what the peace is and why it is shared. For example:   
“Even as the heavens opened and angels spoke, the first word they sang was ‘Peace.’ Even as confused shepherds came from their hills and flocks, uncertain but hopeful, they greeted each other with ‘Peace.’ In the midst of our preparations and excitement, we take a moment to greet one another with a word of peace: peace in this place, peace in our homes, peace in this world…”*

Peace be with you.

**And also with you.**

**Carol:** Hark the Herald Angels Sing (*VU* 48); O Little Town of Bethlehem (*VU* 64); *or*

Dream a Dream(*MV* 158)

## A Service of Lessons and Carols

*The tradition of Lessons and Carols is not familiar to all United Churches. Dating back to the 19th century, and popularized by the Kings’ College, Cambridge, format that began in 1918, Lessons and Carols pairs scripture readings with carols (as hymns or anthems) to tell the whole story of God’s loving promise and redemptive work. The traditional template includes nine lesson-and-carol pairs, but it is easily adapted.*

*The scriptures chosen below help tell the story of faith, including creation, promise, and incarnation. At the least, a reading from the prophets and an account of the Nativity should be read. The two passages from Luke can be combined and abbreviated, if necessary. Some of the carols suggested appear as options elsewhere in this liturgy. Each can be offered either as hymn or as anthem, though the congregation should be given ample opportunity to respond to the Word through the rare joy of singing together.*

*Some worship leaders will not want to forego preaching on Christmas Eve. Either a reflection, as included below, can be offered, or you can chose to leave out some of the readings to afford more time for a sermon. Even so, the abbreviated template below may be too long to accommodate families with small children. If this is the only service offered on Christmas Eve, two or three sections of scripture and song will probably suffice.*

**The First Lesson** Genesis 1:26–2:4

**Carol:** O Come, O Come, Emmanuel (*VU* 1, *select verses*)

**The Second Lesson** Isaiah 9:2, 6–7

**Carol:** Once in Royal David’s City(*VU* 62)

**The Third Lesson** Luke 1:26–35

**Carol:** Hark! the Herald Angels Sing (*VU* 48*)*

**The Fourth Lesson** Luke 2:1–20

**Carol:** Il est né (He Is Born)(*VU* 50)

*This is an excellent point in the liturgy for quiet, reflective music. An excellent option is to have a soloist perform a version of the Magnificat. There are multiple settings of this powerful text; a simple and moving one can be found in Marty Haugen’s setting of “Holden Evening Prayer” (available through* [*www.giamusic.com*](http://www.giamusic.com)*).*

**The Fifth Lesson** John 1:1–14

**Carol:** Joy to the World (*VU* 59)

**Reflection** Hopes and Fears

*A reflection on this night can speak both to those who are in the mood to celebrate, and those who are having a tough time. The words of “O Little Town of Bethlehem” (*VU *64)—“the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight”—can help us to speak about the joy and struggle of both the Holy Family and of our lives.*

*The images of the text from Luke are the most familiar, though they must be brought out of the ancient idiom and given a contemporary resonance. One way is to begin with the story of a refugee family in present day. What has their journey been like, and what feelings have they experienced since arriving in a new place? What gifts have they received along the way, and what gifts have they shared? How does this help us to experience the nativity story in a slightly different way?*

*A message delivered on Christmas Eve has to take into account the varying church experience levels of those present. The preacher has a golden opportunity to engage the congregation, however, and make full use of humour and story. Uncomplicated language, a calm but deliberate pace, and brevity are hallmarks of an inviting reflection, which can open those gathered to wonder and to joy.*

## Responding in Love

**Doxology**

*What can I give him, poor as I am?*

*If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;*

*if I were a wise [one], I would do my part;*

*yet what I can I give him—give my heart.*(*VU* 55)

**Prayers of the People**

*Prayers on this night offer another opportunity for pastoral silence. Short prayer sentences followed by a brief silence allow the congregation to add their own prayers. The prayer leader can make use of all the nativity images—stable, star, angel, shepherd, mother, child—to anchor each thanksgiving and concern. A familiar carol can also be used, a verse at a time, as a response to the prayers offered.*

God of star and stable, you lead us to wonder and to hope.

You gather us together to hear your promise of love.

As we gather, we offer our concerns and our dreams, our hopes and fears… *(silence)*

Like the shepherds who sought the stable, we seek your promise of peace.

We pray for your people broken by violence,

those who live with fear, and those who live without hope.

We remember (*places/events in the world*), and we pray for your courage and peace… *(silence)*

Like the wise ones who dedicated their gifts, we remember those in need.

We pray for those who are lonely, hungry, or forgotten;

for those who are ill in body and in spirit;

for those who are confused or afraid.

We pray for your joy and love, for all your people,

especially those we remember now… *(silence)*

Holy One, you came as a child, offering renewal of spirit and of living.

May our prayers be a new beginning: for healing, truth, and trust.

May we embody love that is forgiving, compassionate, and gracious.

May we send back the angels’ song of peace and joy.

We pray these things in the name of Jesus who became the Christ,   
who taught us when we pray to say…

**Our Father…**

## Moving in God’s Way

*The lighting of candles is a common tradition on Christmas Eve. Where space allows, forming a circle around the sanctuary is dramatic and leaves a lasting impression. Where this isn’t possible, passing the light from the front of the congregation (starting from the Christ candle) while the introduction of Silent Night plays quietly is equally memorable.*

*The aim is to leave a lasting image and feeling with those who have gathered. Efficiency is gained through planning, but the demeanour of the presider should be calm and unhurried. What is being shared by hand is what has been shared by word and song: peace and assurance of God’s presence.*

**Sharing the Christ Light**

**Carol:** Silent Night, Holy Night (*VU* 67)

**Blessing and Benediction**

From this house to yours,

may you share in the gifts of this season.

May love, the promise of generations, attend you.

Joy, the gift of life together, fill you.

Peace, the desire of neighbour and nations, find you.

Hope, the horizon of faith, sustain you.

And may a very Merry Christmas be yours. **Amen.**