# Hidden in Plain Sight: White Gift Sunday

*The story of White Gift Sunday began in 1903, in Painesville, Ohio, where a woman was troubled by her children arguing over the value of different gifts. She suggested that they, together with other children of the Sunday school who were bringing gifts to church for those in need, should wrap the gifts in white paper. The uniformity of decoration would obscure the gifts’ value. The idea allowed everyone to participate in the joy of giving without regard to economic status.*

*The ideas behind the origin of the White Gifts tradition resonate for us today. Poverty may be obvious to the attentive observer, but there are many communities in which poverty goes unseen. Churches continue to play a vital role not only in making someone’s Christmas with simple gifts, but also in declaring that unseen needs are not forgotten. This is the joy that Mary expresses in the Magnificat—that God sees the needs of the people and desires us to rectify injustice, reconcile relationships, and mend the broken.*

*The liturgical significance of the White Gifts is the visibility of the offering and the ability of people of all ages to contribute. For this reason, this worship idea places the Offering toward the beginning of worship, following the Time with Children, so that the White Gifts are given as an act of worship while the whole community is present.*

*Sunday schools can prepare information for congregation members a few weeks in advance and provide suggestions for appropriate gifts based on which organization/project will be the recipient of the gifts.*

*The readings are for the Fourth Sunday of Advent, the Sunday typically associated with the Advent theme of Love. However, the worship service could be adapted to any of the other Advent themes—Hope, Peace, Joy—as the emphasis is on how the giving of White Gifts is a response to the gracious gifts of God.*

## Gathering in God’s Name

**Opening Prayer** (adapt. from Psalm 107)

Give thanks to God, for God is good!

**God’s love endures forever!**

May the lost, the found, the weary, and the joyful hear…

**God’s love endures forever.**

May the thirsty, the hungry, the imprisoned, and the free hear…

**God’s love endures forever.**

As we gather and grow, give and receive…

**We sing of God’s unfailing love!**

**Carol: “**Angels, from the Realms of Glory” (*Voices United* (VU) 36)

**An Advent Prayer of Confession and Healing**

As we witness to fear, in the news and in our streets,

**we make space for hope in our lives.**

With broken hearts, faltering steps, and a desire for healing,

**we make gestures of peace with each other.**

As we greet strangers, neighbours, and friends,

**we make a place for joy in the chaos of our concerns.**

Awaiting a future announced and promised by the Living God,

**we make room for love in our habits, hearts, and homes.**

Holy One, you make the crooked ways straight and mend the broken soul.

On this day, as we offer simple gifts in the face of profound need,

remind us how your grace grows in our giving and receiving.

Inspire the rebirth of love—in our world and in our lives—

as we dedicate ourselves to your justice and mercy.

**Amen.**

(*Light the Advent candles according to your congregation’s tradition*.)

**Passing the Peace**

(*In some churches, the Peace is shared toward the beginning of worship to include children before they go to Sunday school. Here, it serves to reinforce the practice, just prayed for, of greeting “strangers, neighbours, and friends,” in the presence of the whole community.*)

The peace of Christ be with you all.

**And also with you.**

**Refrain** (VU 62 tune: IRBY)

In the dark and cold of winter,

light breaks in to calm our fears.

With the world we long for the season

when the Joy of God draws near.

Help us sing the faithful story

of the joy that is your glory.

*Words: Andy O’Neill*

**Time with Children: Everyone Brings a Gift**

(*Often in a regular worship service, the children leave for Sunday school well before the Offering. Moving the Offering forward for White Gift Sunday presents an opportunity for children to experience giving and receiving as an act of worship.*)

(*After sharing the story of the origins of the White Gift tradition, the leader shares a version of the Nativity story, highlighting that everyone who came to the manger brought a gift. Verse 4 of* *“In the Bleak Midwinter”* (*VU 55*), *which is the refrain following the Time with Children, reflects on this in simple language. Then, the leader can talk about how everyone who comes to church brings a gift. Many times, the gift we bring is monetary and helps to sustain the life and work of the congregation. People also bring gifts of music and song, story-telling and reading, preparing and serving food, quilting, driving, etc. Have a few examples ready to share that illustrate some of the gifts people offer to the life and work of the congregation. Ask the children how they might* (*or how they already*) *contribute.*)

(*The children then bring forward their White Gifts and collect those of others. Some of the older children and youth, prepared in advance, can be invited to collect the offering. All the gifts of the people are brought forward during the Offering refrain. The children leave for Sunday school following the Prayer of Dedication.*)

**Offering and Presentation of White Gifts**

**Offering Refrain** (VU 55, v. 4 tune: CRANHAM)

What can I give him, poor as I am?

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

if I were a wise man, I would do my part;

yet, what I can, I give him—give my heart.

**Prayer of Dedication**

All things come from you, Creating God, and by your grace we offer our gifts in return. Bless us and what we do here, that we and all your people might experience the renewal of life you reveal in Christ Jesus. Open our hearts and minds to receive your continual gift of transformation this day, and always. **Amen.**

## Listening for God’s Word

**Prayer Illumination** (VU 54 tune: PUER NOBIS NASCITUR)

Comes a child, the servant king,

hope for all God’s children,

opening the Word of truth,

with love for every nation,

with love for every nation.

*Words: Andy O’Neill*

**2 Samuel 7: 1–16**

May God’s word be a lamp to our feet,

**and a light to our path.**

**Luke 1: 26–38**

The Gospel of Jesus Christ.

**Thanks be to God.**

**Anthem**

(*The anthem might reflect scriptural instances of the gift of love, e.g. Mary’s making room for Jesus, or God’s love for all. One appropriate and powerful hymn, which is good for large and small choirs, is “Dream a Dream”* (*More Voices* (MV) 158). *It speaks of the universal gifts implied in the birth of the Christ child. An arrangement of the haunting 15th century “I Sing of a Mayden” would also be appropriate*.)

**Sermon**

(*The central theme of this sermon is “Hidden in Plain Sight,” and combines the theme of gifts with the theme of love, emphasizing the love demonstrated in Mary’s faith and God’s vision expressed in her Magnificat. At the beginning or end of each turn in the sermon – from personal story to Hebrew scripture, to Gospel narrative – a short phrase such as, “Sometimes, what is very special is hidden from view,” will anchor the message*.)

(*Begin with a story of someone hiding a gift, or planning a surprise party, or becoming pregnant and carrying the knowledge with them, for a time, in secret. This story works best if it is personal to the preacher, but a humorous story from elsewhere also makes a good beginning*.)

(*The focus for this time of year is the Nativity story, but the Hebrew scripture tells an important story of what it is God requires of us in order for love to be revealed. When David decides to build an extravagant house for the Ark of the Covenant, God speaks to the prophet Nathan in a dream, challenging the assumption that God requires lavish gifts. God does not need a house of cedar, but will make Israel itself the house of God. The resting place for the Ark is not in a great house, but in the hearts, community, and action of God’s people.*)

(*The Gospel reading tells the story of the Annunciation and, more especially, Mary’s response. This gift is an unexpected one and, for someone in Mary’s context—unwed, of low estate, in a first-century Roman-occupied backwater—could be seen as an inconvenient gift. But Mary’s faith apprehends this gift as part of God’s story. Her song, the Magnificat, demonstrates not acquiescence, but strength and purpose rooted in God’s vision. Her gift to the world was her willingness to have her life disrupted, turned upside-down, in order to help God do a new thing*.)

(*Years later, Mary’s son would share this faith with his followers: that we must make room in our lives in order to care for those we know and those we don’t; to go beyond politeness and sentiment in order to reach for compassion, self-giving, and trust in God. Medieval theologian, Meister Eckhart, once asked, “What good is it to me if Mary gave birth to the Son of God 1400 years ago, and I do not also give birth to the Son of God in my time and in my culture? We are all meant to be mothers of God.”*)

**Carol:** “There Was a Child in Galilee” (MV 134)

(*Not only does this hymn reinforce the continuity between Mary’s faithful love and that of Jesus, it also continues where the Gospel lesson ends, with an encapsulation of the Magnificat* (*Luke 1:46–55*).)

## Responding and Going Out in God’s World

**Community at Prayer**

God of Hope, you hear our silent prayers and urgent cries.

Hear us now as we pray for your world and its people.

God of hope, hear our prayer.

God of Peace, on this day we pray

for the people of Bethlehem, of Israel, and of Palestine;

for (*name places suffering conflict*);

for refugees who have nowhere to lay their heads;

for those who find themselves in strange lands.

God of the morning star, protect all people. Guide us in the ways of mercy and justice.

God of Joy, on this day we pray

for those who will spend this day alone;

for those whose tables will have an empty place this year;

for those in care homes and hospitals;

and for our loved ones who live again in your eternal joy.

God of heaven and earth, of anticipation and promise, be with us and heal us.

God of Love, open our hearts, that we might receive you and hear your voice.

Open us to the possibility of true change, in us and in others.

Remind us of your promise, made again to every generation, of your enduring love.

May things on earth be as they are in heaven.

We pray these things in the name of the One who comes, Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

**Carol:** “Down to Earth as a Dove” (VU 42 tune: PERSONENT HODIE)

(*This tune may not be familiar to some congregations. However, it lends itself well to adding percussion, other instruments, and even actions. Alternative hymns include: “Once in Royal David’s City”* (VU *62*), *which summarizes the importance of the Nativity for faith; “There’s a Star in the East”* (VU *70*), *which anticipates the shepherds’ stable discovery; and, “The Virgin Mary Had a Baby Boy”* (VU *73*), *which tells the Nativity story and has the advantage of being a lot of fun!*)

**Commissioning and Benediction**

God comes to us as stranger, messenger, child, and parent.

Let us seek this God of Love in all whom we meet.

May God who is Giver, Gift, and Grace-Among-Us,

be with you today and always. **Amen.**