

*Gathering,* Advent/Christmas/Epiphany 2023‒2024

Advent to Epiphany and the Season after Epiphany

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# 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 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.

## December 3 – Advent 1

*Worship materials for Advent were contributed by Anna Constantin and Chelsea Masterman, Grace U.C., Edmonton, Alta.*

**Isaiah 64:1–9**

We are the clay; you are our potter.

**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**

The Son of Man coming in the clouds.

### Creation Connection

What do we notice in the clouds?

### Spark

Keep awake! What wakes us up to how God is working as we prepare for Christmas? This could be a time to make an emergency preparation kit. What could wake up your community to be open to God’s presence in their midst? What about interrupting worship with different experiences, such as the sound of an alarm clock or a special Christmas sound (bells, a carol, a ho-ho-ho)? Or perhaps use a different sense to invite us to keep awake, such as the smell of baking wafting into worship, a special banner unrolled during the service, or a tactile experience, such as the tickling of feathers (safely and with permission).

### With Children

Prepare in advance a Christmas present with a tag that says “Hope.” Inside it, place a star. As you are sharing about this being the start of Advent, pretend to nod off to sleep. Perhaps the children will encourage you to wake up! Talk about how we need to keep awake and aware of God’s presence around us. What helps us experience the Holy as we prepare for Christmas? Perhaps it is the Advent wreath, a Christmas tree, special events in our community of faith, or special foods. Share how in these moments of preparation, God can surprise us. But we do not have to just wait for a special day like Christmas. We can keep awake and watch for God’s surprises all year long. End by opening the Christmas present together. Hang or place the star in your sanctuary. May it help us remember to wake up and stay awake this Advent.

### Sermon Starter

Sometimes, it’s difficult to take in the clanging, prophetic urging of the Advent scriptures, jolting us with fear and trembling into watchfulness. As we feel our hearts beating and our blood pressure rising, may we remember that the very Jesus who exhorts us to stay awake is also the Christ through whom God calls us into partnership. As God calls us, God strengthens us. One moment we could be utterly exhausted, and then, with one whisper from the Holy Spirit, one nudge, our hearts stir or even leap awake to the presence of the Divine.

This first Sunday of Advent, the scriptures are attuning us to the powerfully transformative Sacred Presence gestating within our midst. God is preparing to give birth. God’s call is growing and maturing, ready to be born among us.

How is God’s call strengthening your community of faith? How has it strengthened the congregation—and you—in the past? What strength do you need from God to keep awake as you move faithfully into the future, offering yourself to be both shaped and inspired by the One who dwells among us, yet to come?

### Hymns

Isaiah 64:1–9

VU 713 “I see a new heaven”

MV 44 “Shadow and substance”

MV 158 “Dream a dream”

*Psalm 80*

VU 1 “O come, O come, Emmanuel”

MV 11 “Come, come Emmanuel”

1 Corinthians 1:3–9

VU 337 “Blessed assurance”

MV 157 “I am a child of God”

MV 161 “I have called you by your name”

Mark 13:24–37

VU 5 “All earth is waiting”

VU 22 “Wait for the Lord”

VU 25 “Lo, he comes with clouds descending”

General/Seasonal

VU 7 “Hope is a star”

VU 34 “Come now, O God of peace (O-So-So)”

MV 140 “As long as we follow”

“Hope is a candle” by Linnea Good

## December 10 – Advent 2

**Isaiah 40:1–11**

Comfort, O comfort my people.

**Psalm 85:1–2, 8–13 (VU p. 802)**

Justice and peace will embrace.

**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

Climate change feels as if it has arrived “like a thief in the night,” though it has gradually come upon us and many warnings have been given. What might we learn from creation about the arrival of the “Day of God”?

### Spark

It might be most interesting to have someone interrupt the service with the words “Prepare the way!” They could speak abruptly, just like John the Baptist, an abruptness that invites us and takes us out of our comfort zones in this Advent preparation time.

### With Children

Prepare in advance another present to unwrap together. Place a symbol of peace, such as a dove, inside a box, then wrap it and attach a label that says “Peace.” Place this box inside a larger box, then wrap this box and attach a label that says, “Prepare the way.”

Ask: What could be inside the box that would prepare us for Advent?

Talk about being prepared for various “emergencies.” Does anyone have a Band-Aid, a Kleenex, or even a snack? What other items might people carry in order to be prepared? (You might “plant” some items in the congregation, such as Scotch tape and a Christmas gift list!) Explore these questions: What do we need to do to prepare for Jesus’ birth? What items and actions prepare us for the coming of Christ?

Open the boxes together and brainstorm how finding peace within ourselves may help us to prepare in this Advent time. Share a breath meditation, which we can use anytime to calm our minds and hearts as we prepare for the coming of Jesus. For the breath meditation, use phrases such as “Prepare the way’” or “Come, Lord Jesus,” or sing together MV 77 “Be still and know.”

### Sermon Starter

How many of us need a word of peace and comfort, especially at this time of year? How many long for God to communicate tenderly to us, to be fed and gathered, carried in God’s bosom,

or gently led along life’s path? How many who await this personal and communal revelation realize that the very God for whom we wait is patiently, actively, waiting for us, too? “Prepare the way!” calls John the Baptist. Today’s texts invite us to prepare, not by putting on a spotless public persona that belies a private reality, but by showing up in all our human complexity.

We prepare by being humbly courageous in acknowledging where and how we miss the mark in loving God, each other, and ourselves. We confess our dreams, passions, fears, and hopes. In our vulnerability, we prepare to meet God, who awaits us, vulnerably entering this dangerous, joyful, heartbreaking, love-filled world as a little baby.

### Hymns

Isaiah 40:1–11

VU 5 “All earth is waiting”

MV 131 “You, Creator God, have searched me”

MV 138 “My love colours outside the lines”

“Shelter me” by Michael Joncas

Psalm 85

VU 684 “Make me a channel of your peace”

2 Peter 3:8–15a

VU 2 “Come, thou long-expected Jesus”

VU 688 “O day of God, draw nigh”

Mark 1:1–8

VU 10 “Prepare the way of the Lord”

VU 18 “There’s a voice in the wilderness”

VU 20 “On Jordan’s bank”

VU 29 “Hark the glad sound”

General/Seasonal

VU 17 “O ancient love”

VU 97 “When a Star is shining”

## December 17 – 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

Do you pray for creation? What does it mean to pray not only for living creatures but for the oceans and sky and land? How might praying for creation shape our relationship with creation?

### Spark

Most sanctuaries are quite bright during worship, but it could be interesting to turn off all the lights at the beginning of worship and then light the Christ candle to remind us how the light of Christ helps us find our way when life is shadowed and bleak.

### With Children

Prepare a present with something that lights up inside (e.g., a battery-operated candle, nightlight, or flashlight) and label it “Joy.” Discuss what items might be in the box that would bring joy and make our spirits sing. Discuss how light helps us to notice the good things around us and to remember how God’s love and light shine through each one of us. Joy can be like a light shining inward to show us the love inside us that brings us joy. How can we share joy with others?

Book suggestion: *Little You* by Richard Van Camp (Orca Book Publishers, 2013).

### Sermon Starter

The passages for today invite us to consider the transformative work of God among us. The God we recognize as worthy of acknowledging and celebrating in worship works in the midst of injustice to bring justice, draws us through mourning into joy, and makes us holy. This is not to say that injustice is good, or that we should never mourn, or that we will never make mistakes if we love and are loved by God. The reality is that the work of salvation is happening constantly among us, through each of us and all of us together, and in the midst of creation. The passages testify to the light that is God’s creating, redeeming, and sustaining presence throughout time and space. As the moon reflects the light of the sun, so we receive stories and songs of those who testify to the light. We too testify to the light, even as we await the birth that comes with the dawn.

### Hymns

Isaiah 61:1–4, 8–11

MV 2 “Come all you people”

MV 157 “I am a child of God”

MV 182 “Grateful”

“The Spirit of the Lord” by Jim Strathdee

Psalm 126

VU 9 “People, look east”

Luke 1:47–55

VU p. 899 “Song of Mary”

MV 18 “Lord, prepare me to be a sanctuary”

MV 103 “Ka mana’o ’I ’O”

MV 120 “My soul cries out”

MV 134 “There was a child in Galilee (Dreaming Mary)”

1 Thessalonians 5:16–24

VU 23 “Joy shall come”

VU 249 “Rejoice in the Lord always”

John 1:6–8, 19–28

VU 30 “Hail to God’s own anointed”

VU 82 “A light is gleaming”

VU 585 “Jesus bids us shine”

General/Seasonal

VU 366 “like a child”

MV 71 “When the wind of winter blows”

MV 220 “Hope shines as the solitary star”

## December 24 – 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 will sing of God’s steadfast love.

**Romans 16:25–27**

Glory to the only wise God through Jesus Christ.

**Luke 1:26–38**

The angel Gabriel visits Mary.

### Creation Connection

We tend to think of houses as buildings. What if we thought of God’s house as all of creation—the whole universe and beyond?

### Spark

It would be wonderful to invite one or more parents (or grandparents, aunts, uncles) in the congregation with a beautiful little one in their arms (in all of their expressive humanness!) to share what it had felt like when they first learned that their beloved child was coming—through birth, adoption, or fostering—and how they felt, in their excitement and fear, that God and the support of their community were present.

### With Children

Prepare a Christmas present with the tag “Love.” Place a mirror in the box. Ask the young people what gifts they are giving to the people they love and what gifts are they hoping to receive. Open the present and show the mirror so the children can see themselves and discover the best gift that can ever be given. Or, especially for children who may not be able to see their reflection, be the mirror yourself and take time to describe what you notice about each of them, not just physical features, but their joy, love, and caring. Remind the children that there is more to us than what we might see in a mirror, like the love we share with others. Share how Mary said yes to sharing herself so that Jesus could be born. Ask the children about how we can say yes to God.

Book suggestion: *The Little Gift of Nothing* by Patrick McDonnell (LB Kids, 2005).

### Sermon Starter

As the saying goes, “Love is a verb.” God’s choice to live among us, as one of us, is love in all its glorious action. This year, the fourth Sunday of Advent is also Christmas Eve, and the birth of Christ is imminent. We read of Mary who practises love, courageously accepting God’s purpose for her life as delivered by the angel Gabriel. Her words and actions echo throughout time, giving heart to all who receive God’s call to love deeply and actively in ways that are life- giving, life-changing, large and small. Mary not only embodied these ways, she also partnered with God to give life to the flesh, blood, and spirit of Jesus, Emmanuel, God-with-Us. May God strengthen us through this good news, to say yes to the One who makes love known in co-creative action—and who is becoming present in a new way, very soon!

### Hymns

1 Samuel 7:1–11, 16

MV 1 “Let us build a house”

MV 152 “You who watch the highest heavens (Song of Sanctuary)”

Luke 1:47–55

VU 14 “To a maid whose name was Mary”

VU 16 “Mary, woman of the promise”

MV 79 “Spirit, open my heart”

Psalm 89

VU 17 “O ancient love”

MV 103 “Ka mana’o ’I ’O”

Romans 16:25–27

VU 374 “Come and find the quiet centre”

VU 661 “Come to my heart”

Luke 1:26–38

VU 14 “To a maid whose name was Mary”

MV 90 “Don’t be afraid”

MV 94 “Love knocks and waits”

MV 134 “There was a child in Galilee (Dreaming Mary)”

General/Seasonal

MV 62 “There is room for all”

MV 84 “In you there is a refuge”

“Holy is the night” by Jim Strathdee

## December 24 – Christmas Eve (Sunday)

*Worship materials for Christmas Eve through New Year’s Day were contributed by Ruthanne McLagan, Calvary U.C., London, Ontario.*

**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

How is creation singing on this night of Jesus’ birth?

### Spark

As people arrive, the ushers may invite them to keep wearing their scarves during the service. If possible, lend or give scarves to those people who don’t have them. Later in the service, during the reading of Luke 2:1–14, a person depicting Mary can place the baby, a bundle wrapped in a wool scarf, in the manger. Remind the people gathered of the comfort of God, symbolized by the scarves they are wearing.

### With Children

Ask people of all ages to participate in the symbolic gesture of preparing an earthly bed for the infant Christ. Have ready some pencils, strips of paper (yellow, gold, and brown), and a manger (or crèche). Participants are invited to think about a burden or difficulty carried recently (by themselves or by the community) and then use one side of the paper to write about it or draw a picture of it. Use the other side for a joy experienced recently (again, by themselves or by the community). Ask participants to set the paper strips like hay in the manger, to create a bed for the burdens and joys awaiting Christ.

### Sermon Starter

In Psalm 96:7–8, we are told to ascribe glory and strength to God. To *ascribe* means to think or say that something is caused by, comes from, or is associated with something else. What we ascribe to God can influence our side of the relationship with God. It is not certain whether God imposes burdens upon us to test us; it is certain that God gave us Christ to lift our burdens. As we hit the reset button to refresh our faith and welcome Christ anew to be our “Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace,” we prepare a bed by laying down our burdens and joys. Christ settles into the needs and the joys of our individual lives and communities of faith.

The shepherds are witnesses to the arrival of the Messiah in the humble birthing place on a bed of straw. They ascribe glory and strength to God. How can we be like those first witnesses? Do we have their qualities as we bring our offering to God?

How can we welcome Christ anew into our lives this Christmas? How might you encourage the people gathered with new ways to celebrate Christ’s birth, even if those worshippers expect the familiar, traditional Christmas Eve pageant or service? The star over a stable in Bethlehem shines like the dawn of wondrous possibilities through Christ.

### Hymns

Isaiah 9:2–7

VU 44 “It came upon the midnight clear”

VU 45 “Joy is now in every place”

VU 48 “Hark! the herald angels sing”

MV 17 “God in the darkness”

MV 20 “God of still waiting”

Psalm 96

VU 50 “He is born”

VU 75 “While shepherds watched their flocks”

VU p. 888 “Earth and all stars”

MV 83 “Let my spirit always sing”

MV 180 “Sing, sing out! (Sing a New Song)”

Titus 2:11–14

VU 68 “All poor ones and humble”

MV 147 “God, help us to treasure”

MV 158 “Dream a dream”

MV 162 “Christ, within us hidden”

Luke 2:1–14, (15–20)

VU 57 “Oh, how joyfully”

VU 58 “Infant holy, infant lowly”

VU 69 “Away in a manger”

VU 75 “While shepherds watched their flocks”

MV 137 “Welcome, Jesus, you are welcome”

## December 25 – Christmas Day (Monday)

**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

Often, the psalms speak of the earth as a sentient presence: “Let the earth be glad!” How might we adapt our perceptions to understand the earth as capable of feeling emotions?

### Spark

An award is a prize that is earned. A gift does not need to be earned. Many of us feel embarrassed when we receive a gift that is unexpectedly generous or undeserved. Our self-imposed guilty feelings are not what most givers intend. How will you rejoice today and celebrate God’s generosity by sharing the good news that Christ is here?

### With Children

Bring an assortment of pine cones. What might we do with them? Do we eat them? Make things from them? Plant them or let them settle into the ground naturally? Show the pine seeds protected within the cone. Remove a seed and hold it up to contrast how small a pine seed is next to a pine tree. Set the pine cones and seeds in soil in a planter, sharing how the seeds need time to grow.

Has anyone given or received a gift that will take time to grow, assemble, or learn how to use? Perhaps some shepherds were surprised that Christ arrived with some growing to do. Perhaps they thought the Saviour might arrive as a full- grown tree rather than as a pine cone. Some gifts of God—like pine cones and God’s son, Jesus—are gifts that need our care to grow in the fertile soil of our lives. Let us thank God for the wise design of pine cones and the gift of our Saviour, who arrived as a newborn babe.

### Sermon Starter

The arrival of the Messiah was anticipated, yet the angels did not announce it in the temple of Jerusalem. They proclaimed it in the fields where shepherds lived. By sunrise, many shepherds had witnessed the truth for themselves: Christ had arrived in the night as a vulnerable infant in a humble place.

Christmas morning invites growth as we receive Christ from God and as God. Newborn Jesus Christ is a gift with no instructions except to honour, protect, and love. This Christmas day, God renews God’s relationship with humanity, and we are invited to let our faith grow stronger. How will we greet this opportunity? We might feel parental awe, like Mary, and treasure the blessing of such joy. Or we might feel surprised, like the shepherds, that God is here humbly in our lives. Or we might feel joy, like the angels, and want to sing praises to God. It is possible to feel all these reactions at once as we celebrate the good news that Christ is born.

How might we be messengers of this good news? Will we proclaim boldly, like the angels did; spread the word of what we know is true, as the shepherds did; or declare a call for justice, like Mary did? The ways of sharing the message of Christmas morning might be as diverse as the people who rejoice in the good news.

### Hymns

Isaiah 62:6–12

VU 389 “God is here”

VU 583 “Jesus came, a child like me”

VU 714 “Come, we that love”

MV 47 “Born in human likeness”

Psalm 97

VU 28 “Herald! Sound the note of gladness”

VU p. 820 “Make a joyful noise”

MV 39 “Mother Earth, our Mother birthing”

MV 40 “Never ending joy”

Titus 3:4–7

VU 35 “Good Christian friends, rejoice”

VU 72 “From heaven above to earth I come”

MV 174 “Soil of God, you and I (Holy Ground)”

MV 191 “What can I do?”

Luke 2:(1–7), 8–20

VU 36 “Angels, from the realms of glory”

VU 38 “Angels we have heard on high”

VU 43 “Go, tell it on the mountain”

VU 59 “Joy to the world”

VU 60 “O come, all ye faithful”

MV 213 “Take up his song”

## December 31 – 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 a slave but a child of God and an heir.

**Luke 2:22–40**

Jesus is presented in the temple.

### Creation Connection

Let all things praise God! Lightning might cause us to praise God in awe and wonder. Can we let hail, snow, frost, and gale-force winds evoke the same response?

### Spark

Playfully personify the current year as an elderly person and the new year as a baby.

“Out with the old and in with the new” is a flawed mentality. In fact, the gospel reading today invites us to bring generations of people together to welcome the presentation of the child Jesus in the temple. But shouldn’t we continue to pay attention to the wisdom of elders? Perhaps invite both an elder and a youth (a child or younger adult) to share the wisdom they have gleaned from the past year and their hopes for the new year.

### With Children

Bring New Year’s Eve noisemakers but don’t use them yet. Why do people make a lot of noise with fireworks, honking horns, and noisemakers on New Year’s Eve? In the past, people would sometimes make noises at midnight to scare away evil spirits and bad intentions from the New Year. That’s how the tradition started. But sounds can also signal joy to welcome in a new year. Let’s celebrate all we have learned and experienced in 2023 and celebrate all we will learn and experience as God’s children in 2024. Let’s experience the joyous sound of music (e.g., organ, guitar, trumpet) to celebrate this morning. (Recordings could be used.) Now let’s share the joy of a new year in Christ—blow the party horns, dance, jump, smile, play instruments, sing!

### Sermon Starter

According to Psalm 148, all of creation is to praise the Creator. Verse 14 describes a horn that God gave to God’s people; the word for *horn* is sometimes translated as “strength.” The ancient Hebrews understood this horn to represent a sacred vessel to hold oil for anointing. It might also refer to a shofar, a sheep’s horn that was trumpeted for the Sabbath, a new moon, or the anointing of a new king, and was used to help bring down the walls of Jericho.

Luke 2 concludes with Jesus at 12, growing in wisdom and in the favour of God and God’s people. Christian favour is not measured in armies, money, or fame. Christian favour is immeasurable, since God’s love and mercy are limitless. Christ is the horn of peaceful strength through which we are anointed with love and mercy. Christ is the horn with which we will trumpet in a new calendar year. Do we feel another year older and wiser? Or do we feel forever young, like a child of God with much to learn about our faith?

### Hymns

Isaiah 61:10—62:3

VU 40 “Before the marvel of this night”

VU 59 “Joy to the world”

VU 79 “Arise, your light is come”

Psalm 148

VU 45 “Joy is now in every place”

VU 217 “All creatures of our God and King”

VU 222 “Come, let us sing”

VU 535 “For the music of creation”

MV 174 “Soil of God, you and I (Holy Ground)”

Galatians 4:4–7

VU 61 “Of the Father’s love begotten”

VU 62 “Once in royal David’s city”

MV 83 “Let my spirit always sing”

MV 157 “I am a child of God”

Luke 2:22–40

VU 42 “Down to earth, as a dove”

VU 536 “Born in song”

VU 556 “Would you bless our homes and families”

VU pp. 902*–*903 “Song of Simeon”

## January 1 – New Year’s Day (Monday)

**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

What does it mean to imagine a new heaven and a new earth?

### Spark

Play with Ecclesiastes 3:1–13. Put up a few of the biblical pairings on a flip chart or slide deck: a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to harvest, a time to weep and a time to laugh, etc. Then invite people to add their own pairings. Ecclesiastes 3:12–13 assures us that people are meant to be happy, to do good while they live, and to find satisfaction in their work. Ask the congregants which pairings help them find happiness and satisfaction.

### With Children

What do humans, plants, and animals have in common? All living things need water to survive, whether from a tap, a rain cloud, melting snow, or a fresh-flowing stream. Without water, our bodies cannot work properly. More than half our body weight is water, and we can’t survive more than a few days without it. Why? Water in our blood sends oxygen to all the cells of our bodies. Water is also in a fluid called lymph, which helps us fight off illness. Water helps keep our temperature normal. We need water to digest food and get rid of waste. Lots of foods contain water, especially fruits and veggies like tomatoes and celery. Sadly, there are many people, plants, and animals that do not have enough fresh, clean water to keep them healthy. That’s why we need to work together to protect water and provide safe water for everyone. We need clean air so clean rain and snow can fall from the clouds. Wetlands and streams are homes for all types of animals who depend on naturally filtered water. Let’s keep the water flowing to all people, plants, and animals.

### Sermon Starter

What does God expect from us this year? Is there time to accomplish it all? Ecclesiastes 3 assures us that there is a time for everything, and that God makes everything beautiful in its time. We might remember that we toil as humble workers for God in God’s world and hold in our hearts the eternity of God’s realm to come.

Today’s gospel reading prompts us to ask whether we have taken the time to notice the people around us and wonder about their needs. Have we given our time to engage with others as allies in seeking justice? Have we set aside time to have real conversations with others in which we come to know their perspectives? Do we take the gospel as its word and open ourselves to encounters with those who would broaden our perspectives? If we don’t feel able to be disciples serving in places of greatest need, these questions might make us uncomfortable. Yet, how can we serve? Point to projects happening through your congregation or Mission and Service. There are many ways we can deliver prayers, messages, and support to people in their time of need. We seek to be the presence of Christ in the world, because whatever we do for one of the least of us, we do for Christ.

### Hymns

*Ecclesiastes 3:1–13*

VU 530 “All beautiful the march of days”

MV 27 “Creator God you gave us life”

MV 136 “When hands reach out and fingers trace”

MV 165 “There is a time”

*Psalm 8*

VU 226 “For the beauty of the earth”

MV 143 “We cannot own the sunlit sky”

MV 155 “Unbounded Spirit, breath of God”

*Revelation 21:1–6*a

VU 708 “My Lord, what a morning”

VU 713 “I see a new heaven”

MV 49 “When we seek language”

MV 115 “Behold, behold, I make all things new”

*Matthew 25:31–46*

VU 568 “Dear Lord, lead me day by day”

VU 600 “When I needed a neighbour”

MV 79 “Spirit, open my heart”

MV 114 “Behold the face of Christ”

MV 126 “Are you a shepherd?”

MV 147 “God, help us to treasure”

## January 6 – Epiphany (Saturday)

*Worship materials for January 6 to January 21 were contributed by Matt Emery, Cloverdale U.C., Surrey, B.C.*

**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

How might God be defending the earth from human-caused devastation? Or would God do that?

### Spark

While “light” often takes centre stage as the image for Epiphany, the magi only experienced the true and full revelation of Jesus Christ when they encountered him in his real human body. How might you “put flesh” to God’s presence in your worship and in your community? Perhaps bless the worshippers’ physical bodies by anointing them with oil (if possible, oil scented with frankincense or myrrh). How might online worshippers be invited into such a blessing of the flesh?

### With Children

Ahead of time, create name tags for each of the children. Ask them how they might go about finding something that they’re searching for. What tools would they use? Come prepared with a flashlight (an obvious Epiphany symbol), but also a map, compass, or GPS device. Mention that, in the story, the magi consult other people, and some they can trust more than others. The children might also find trusted people to consult, such as parents, pastors, teachers, or caring adults in their church. The magi also consulted scripture. We can do that, too. Share a scripture that has been important in helping you make decisions. You might also provide a bookmark for each child with a list of scriptures for when they are sad, or angry, or need courage, etc.

### Sermon Starter

The word *Epiphany* has to do with “manifestation” or “revelation.” As a feast day, Epiphany celebrates the revelation of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles or “the nations,” as embodied by the foreign astrologers who came seeking the Christ child. But how does the revealing of Christ—Christ’s being and identity, will and way, presence and promise—happen for us? The story in Matthew has a number of clues. First, there is the light of the star reminding us of the things of Christ that help us most truly understand ourselves and the world. Then, religious leaders turn to scripture to help them interpret the hunches and hazy inklings of the magi. Not to be missed, though, are opposition and conflict as clues. As the Protestant Reformers (especially Martin Luther) remind us, there is no true revelation of Christ that does not show us the cross. Or, as noted biblical scholar Raymond Brown puts it, “The gospel is the good news, but that gospel must have a passion and rejection, as well as success” (*The Birth of the Messiah* [Doubleday, 1993], p. 183). Most of all, though, the full revelation comes in *a body*—upon experiencing the Christ child himself. How is the fullness of Christ’s person and work taking flesh for you, for your community of faith, for the world?

### Hymns

Isaiah 60:1–6 (and General/Seasonal)

VU 79 “Arise, your light is come”

VU 82 “A light is gleaming”

VU 87 “I am the light of the world”

VU 92 “In the darkness shines the splendour”

VU 98 “How brightly beams the Morning Star”

“Arise, shine” by Ruth Cunningham; for copyright information, visit musicthatmakescommunity.org/arise\_shine

Psalm 72

VU 30 “Hail to God’s own anointed”

Matthew 2:1–12

VU 81 “As with gladness men of old”

“Brightest and best of the sons [stars] of the morning” by Reginald Heber (HY\* 49, HB\*\* 432, hymnary.org)

“We three kings of Orient are” by John Henry Hopkins Jr. (hymnary.org)

*\*The Hymnary* (1930)

*\*\*The Hymnbook* (1972)

## January 7 – 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

Psalm 29 declares the power of God as revealed in creation. Do we understand God’s power being revealed in creation?

### Spark

If you don’t have a baptism that could be scheduled for this week, consider incorporating a rite of baptismal remembrance (renewal) in the service. It could be as simple as a few words of introduction, followed by a prayer of thanksgiving over the waters (based on one used at a baptism), and culminating in an asperges, using evergreen branches to sprinkle the assembly with water from the baptismal font. Don’t be bashful; it’s sensory and fun, and the involuntary nature of simply “receiving” the water declares God’s grace, which claims us before we can even respond. While the sprinkling happens, the assembly could sing the hymn “Remember and rejoice,” by Ruth Duck, available in the hymnal *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*.

### With Children

Today we celebrate baptism and remember the baptism of Jesus. Baptism is something that can’t be undone. Just like you can't untoast a piece of toast, God’s love for us can never be undone. God loves us no matter what. That is what baptism tells us. There is nothing we can do to earn God’s love. And there is nothing we can do to make God stop loving us. There are some things in life we wish we could undo, but we are glad that baptism can’t be undone. God loves and cares for us forever.

### Sermon Starter

At his baptism by John, we learn of Jesus’ own glimpsing of “the heavens torn apart.” And, indeed, in Jesus himself, we too experience that the fabric is torn. (Note that Mark’s gospel also reports that the curtain of the temple is torn in two when Jesus dies.) Whatever boundary we imagine in which we are “here” and God is “out there somewhere” is revealed to us as torn apart in the person and work of Jesus—his coming, his life, his teaching and ministry, and his death, resurrection, ascension, and reign with God. It’s probably safe to say that the breech was always there, and that whatever barrier we humans presumed would keep God out has always been penetrated. But for us, who call ourselves Christians, Jesus is the One in whom we discover that we can’t hide the rip in the fabric anymore. When we turn to Jesus, we experience the heavens torn open. God can’t be kept out; in fact, God *willingly* enters our world, our pain, our joy, our life. There’s no going back. Where has God torn something open for you or in you, a rupture from which there is no going back, for which you are now grateful?

### Hymns

Genesis 1:1–5

VU 251 “God created heaven and earth”

VU 282 “Long before the night (This Ancient Love)”

VU 313 “God, whose almighty word”

Psalm 29

VU 308 “Many and great, O God, are your works”

VU p. 755 “The God of heaven”

Mark 1:4–11

VU 99 “Christ, when for us you were baptized”

“Down Galilee’s slow roadways” by Sylvia Dunstan (hymnary.org)

General/Seasonal

VU 387 “Loving Spirit”

VU 442 “Wash, O God, our sons and daughters”

VU 448 “We know that Christ is raised”

VU 449 “Crashing waters at creation”

“Wind upon the waters” by Marty Haugen (hymnary.org)

## January 14 – 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

Do we care for our bodies as temples of God’s Spirit? Do we care for the earth as God’s temple?

### Spark

“Philip said to [Nathanael], ‘Come and see.’” Note that the invitation here is *not* to come and see the church, or our good works or good people; no, it is to come and see, come and *experience Jesus*. Provide an opportunity for people meditate on a diversity of visual images of Jesus or on various feelings one might associate with Jesus (e.g., by projecting artistic representations and saying aloud some words associated with Jesus). If space allows, you may also set up stations with different images or physical objects associated with Jesus that could be held and examined by touch. Make sure to include different styles, cultural backgrounds, and formats. The Art in the Christian Tradition database from Vanderbilt Divinity School is a good place to start (available online).

### With Children

The reading from 1 Samuel features a young person as the central character, making it an obvious focal point for a children’s moment, such as a dramatic or interactive retelling of the story itself. Highlight how Samuel turns to a trusted adult when he doesn’t know how to interpret what’s going on, but that this adult is *not* one of his parents. Where might they find trusted adults in their lives? How do they know who they can trust? What advice did Eli have for Samuel? What guidance might a faithful elder in the congregation have for the children?

### Sermon Starter

If you include both the 1 Samuel and John readings in your service, you have two very rich and yet very different stories of call: a child and an adult; an open, willing listener and a snarky skeptic; someone called to a specific, yet dismaying purpose and someone called to an undefined adventure of following. (And we get two still more contrasting stories next week.) This week could be a good time to reflect on the variety of ways we experience the calling of God and the different purposes to which a calling can lead. For some people, living out their call through paid employment is a luxury they cannot afford. What might that “call” be like? Think also about those for whom paid employment is now in the past; what might “call” be like in that phase of life? You’ll want to think ahead to next week’s readings and sermon, too, to be intentional about a different emphasis for each of these weeks.

### Hymns

1 Samuel 3:1–10, (11–20)

VU 506 “Take my life and let it be”

VU 509 “I, the Lord of sea and sky (Here I Am, Lord)”

MV 167 “Hush! Hush!”

Psalm 139

VU 384 “The lone, wild bird”

MV 131 “You, Creator God, have searched me”

“O God, you search me” by Bernadette Farrell (hymnary.org)

John 1:43–51

VU 299 “Teach me, God, to wonder”

VU 500 “Blessed Jesus, at your word”

VU 567 “Will you come and follow me”

“Called as partners in Christ’s service” by Jane Parker Huber (hymnary.org)

“I sought the Lord, and afterward I knew” by Jean Ingelow (hymnary.org)

“I want to walk as a child of the light” by Kathleen Thomerson (hymnary.org)

## January 21 – Third after Epiphany

**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

While the story of Jonah spending time in the belly of a whale is a parable, what happenings in nature stretch our understandings of what is possible?

### Spark

Place a fishing net in your worship space, draped over the communion table (or another worship centre or altar) and perhaps scatter a few more in the middle of the aisles. To each, affix a sign, such as “Property of Zebedee & Sons, Ltd.,” or “Sorry for the mess, BRB! **—**Andrew.” The idea is that the sense of “abandonment” of these nets will confront your worshippers as they enter into the space.

### With Children

As a follow-up to last week’s story featuring Samuel, focus on the psalter selection and its reference to the soul waiting “in silence” for God. This could be especially powerful if you make use of the Taizé refrain “In God alone” (see hymn list below) or MV 77 “Be still and know.” How can we help our young people pause and have a break from the “noise” all around them, finding stillness in God’s presence?

### Sermon Starter

Simon, Andrew, James, and John leave their nets and follow Jesus based on…nothing. Nothing aside from Jesus’ call and invitation to follow. Sometimes we’ve tried to dig into the psychology or sociology of these first disciples to try to explain why they followed, as though something was “wrong” with them, their situation, or their world. What if the point isn’t what’s “wrong” with them, but what’s right and true with Jesus? As Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it, “This encounter gives witness to Jesus’ unconditional, immediate, and inexplicable authority. Jesus calls to discipleship, not as a teacher and a role model, but as the Christ, the Son of God” *(Discipleship: Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, Volume 4 [Fortress Press, 2003]).

What’s right and true about Jesus *for you*? When have you followed a call that defied or went deeper than any rational explanation? This is an opportunity for personal testimony on either of these questions, whether your own or that of a member of your community of faith. Don’t be afraid to talk about your own “call story.” While we can fall into a trap of only ever talking about “call” in relationship to the authorized ministries of the church, “people in the pew” are often honestly curious about the path that led you into ministry.

### Hymns

VU 120 “O Jesus, I have promised”

VU 341 “Fairest Lord Jesus” (or “Beautiful Saviour”)

VU 562 “Jesus calls us”

VU 567 “Will you come and follow me”

VU 608 “Dear God, who loves all humankind”

VU 642 “Be thou my vision”

VU p. 780 “My soul finds rest in God alone”

MV 167 “Hush! Hush!”

“Called as partners in Christ’s service” by Jane Parker Huber (hymnary.org)

“In God alone (Mon âme se repose)” by the Taizé Community (hymnary.org)

“You walk along our shoreline,” text by Sylvia Dunstan (hymnary.org)

## January 28 – Fourth after Epiphany

*Worship materials for January 28 to February 11 were contributed by Ian Wilgus, Richmond Hill U.C., King City, Ont.*

**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

Fear is the beginning of wisdom. How might this proverb apply to our fears of a changing climate?

### Spark

Take the time in worship for congregation members to write down the names of people in their lives who are wise. Have them write each name or draw a picture representing the person on a sticky note. Alternatively, they might write down a piece of wisdom they received from someone of an older generation in their family or in the congregation. Then invite them to come up and place their sticky note on a bulletin board. After the service, people can look at their collective wisdom board.

### With Children

Discuss with the children what it means to be wise. Who do they consider wise? And what traits do they consider wise? Why is wisdom important? Would they like to be wise? Then, talk to them about the wisdom found in God and in Jesus’ ministry. That wisdom comes to us through the stories in the Bible and through people in our community of faith. You might pick a favourite scripture passage or story that has brought you much wisdom and share it with the children.

### Sermon Starter

Wisdom in the Bible, and the idea that fearing God is the source of wisdom, is interesting to explore. The biblical Hebrew word for wisdom is *chokmah* or *hokma,* הָמְכָח. In Latin, the word is *sophia*, σοφία. In Proverbs 8:22–31, we find a feminine personification of wisdom.

The notion of fear is complex in the context of ancient Israel, so that is worth exploring.

It is much more about awe and respect than being afraid. It is about placing one’s trust in a higher power. What notion of fear do you view as a source of wisdom? How do you notice Jesus showing wisdom?

### Hymns

VU 358 “When Jesus the healer”

VU 567 “Will you come and follow me”

VU 570 “Jesus’ hands were kind hands”

VU 578 “As a fire is meant for burning”

MV 10 “Come and seek the ways of Wisdom” MV 90 “Don't be afraid”

MV 145 “Draw the circle wide”

MV 169 “When hands reach out beyond divides”

## February 4 – Fifth after Epiphany

**Isaiah 40:21–31**

Those who wait upon God shall renew their strength.

**Psalm 147:1–11, 20*c* (VU pp. 868–869 Part One)**

God heals the broken-hearted.

**1 Corinthians 9:16–23**

I have become all things to all people for the gospel’s sake.

**Mark 1:29–39**

Simon’s mother-in-law and many others healed.

### Creation Connection

In your area and context, how does the earth renew itself if humans don’t get in the way?

### Spark

Bring pieces of a broken clay pot and distribute them to the congregation. Then have everyone work together or ask a few volunteers to collectively place the pieces together with glue or tape. Then show the way that the broken materials have been repaired. Invite people to ponder this image. Those who wish to may be invited to come and feel the pieced-together pot. How can they heal others’ broken hearts? How can they be the glue?

### With Children

Create large puzzle pieces, with a few letters or a word of an affirming message, for example, “You are loved,” on each piece. You could also use pieces of a picture, like hearts. Give the children time to put the puzzle together. Make it easy. Ensure that the congregation can witness the process. Then affirm that they can help God in the work of loving one another. They can work together, just like they worked together on the puzzle, to love family, friends, neighbours, and all the world.

### Sermon Starter

Consider what it would have been like to be healed. Is there someone in your congregation who might share a story of being healed through medical care, prayer, love of another, or forgiveness? It could be a physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual healing, or it could be a healing still in process. Someone else might offer a story of being the one offering healing.

Simon’s mother-in-law was in a precarious situation health-wise. She had a fever that could have endangered her life. (The Gospel of Luke reports it as a high fever.) If people did not know what caused her illness and feared catching it, she may also have faced isolation from the community, something that would have been tremendously difficult for her. Yet Jesus went to her and spoke with her. He offered her healing. Imagine how that must have felt. When have we experienced an act of healing in body, mind, or spirit? How can we as church offer healing?

### Hymns

VU 256 “O God beyond all praising”

VU 357 “Tell me the stories of Jesus”

VU 374 “Come and find the quiet centre”

VU 400 “Lord, listen to your children praying”

VU 644 “I was there to hear your borning cry”

MV 28 “God of the Bible”

MV 45 “You are holy (Hamba nathi)”

MV 154 “Deep in our hearts”

MV 161 “I have called you by your name”

## February 11 – 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

Psalm 50 is a humbling psalm, as God summons the earth as witness against humanity.

### Spark

Invite people to move to stations located throughout the worship space. At the stations, they will encounter visual representations of the Transfiguration, as well a physical symbol related to the image that can be held and examined by touch. Pick a diverse range of expressions. Give people time to experience each one. Ask people to write down or draw their insights for the offering plate. Then read out some of them after the offering. Also allow time for people to share their insights aloud, rather than write them down.

### With Children

Discuss the way that creation transforms. Explain how dandelions transform from yellow blossoms to a ball of seeds ready to fly in the wind. Seeds or dormant roots in the ground develop into flower buds and then blooms. Caterpillars create a cocoon and emerge sometime later as a butterfly. A baby grows and becomes a child, a teen, and then an adult. Change and transformation are part of all life. They are not to be scared of, but to treasure. Share the story of the transformation or Transfiguration of Jesus. Peter, James, and John treasured their experience of Jesus’

### Sermon Starter

Consider an experience when your perspective was transformed. Describe the experience. What made you realize that person was God’s child, beloved of God? What message did they have for you? It may not have been something they said, but rather something they did or something you learned from the whole experience. How were you changed? Why? How does this help you understand the Transfiguration story? What implications are there for the church as we consider transfiguration and transformation? What knowledge needs to shine in our hearts and in our community of faith? What perspectives might be getting in the way of recognizing all who are beloved by God? What perspectives might need to change in order that God’s work be accomplished and God’s love shared? Who needs to experience us declaring, “You are God’s beloved child”?

### Hymns

VU 232 “Joyful, joyful we adore you”

VU 586 “We shall go out with hope of resurrection”

VU 595 “We are pilgrims (The Servant Song)”

VU 606 “In Christ there is no east or west”

VU 660 “How firm a foundation”

VU p. 808 “On eagle’s wings”

MV 81 “Love us into fullness”

MV 85 “Take, O take me as I am”

MV 120 “My soul cries out”

MV 176 “Three things I promise”