**

# *Gathering,* A/C/E 2019‒2020

Advent to Epiphany and the Season After Epiphany

[Advent to Epiphany and the Season After Epiphany 2](#_Toc19027003)

[Season of Advent 2](#_Toc19027004)

[Season of Christmas 2](#_Toc19027005)

[Season of Epiphany 2](#_Toc19027006)

[December 1 – Advent 1 4](#_Toc19027007)

[December 8 – Advent 2 6](#_Toc19027008)

[December 15 – Advent 3 8](#_Toc19027009)

[December 22 – Advent 4 10](#_Toc19027010)

[December 24 – Christmas Eve 12](#_Toc19027011)

[December 25 – Christmas Day (Wednesday) 14](#_Toc19027012)

[December 29 – First Sunday after Christmas 16](#_Toc19027013)

[January 1 – New Year’s Day 18](#_Toc19027014)

[January 5 – Second Sunday after Christmas 20](#_Toc19027015)

[January 6 – Epiphany (Monday) 22](#_Toc19027016)

[January 12 – Baptism of the Lord Sunday 24](#_Toc19027017)

[January 19 – Second Sunday after Epiphany 26](#_Toc19027018)

[January 26 – Third Sunday after Epiphany 28](#_Toc19027019)

[February 2 – Fourth Sunday after Epiphany 30](#_Toc19027020)

[February 9 – Fifth Sunday after Epiphany 32](#_Toc19027021)

[February 16 – Sixth Sunday after Epiphany 34](#_Toc19027022)

[February 23 – Transfiguration Sunday 36](#_Toc19027023)

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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 1 – Advent 1

*Worship materials for Advent were contributed by Taylor Croissant, Kitscoty-Marwayne P.C., Kitscoty, Alta.*

Isaiah 2:1–5

Swords into ploughshares.

Psalm 122 (VU p. 845)

With joy to God’s house.

Romans 13:11–14

Wake up! The day is near.

Matthew 24:36–44

No one knows the hour.

### To Ponder

What does it mean for you to name Jesus as Messiah or the Christ, the Anointed One?

### Spark

Prepare a historical time-line on a PowerPoint, whiteboard, or flip chart showing the history of ancient Israel from King David to Jesus. Show the kingdom splitting into Israel and Judah, the conquests of the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, and Romans, and the destruction of the temples in 587 BCE and 70 CE.

### With Children

Ask how many sleeps there are until Christmas (24) and if that feels like a long time. Talk about how time can seem to move slowly when we are waiting for something, like summer vacation or Christmas. You can then talk about the people in Jesus’ time who were waiting for a promised messiah, because they were going through a bad time. Some people believed that Jesus was that messiah, and so followed him and learned from him. *Messiah* means “anointed one.” Talk about being anointed or chosen to do a certain job. We understand Jesus to be the Messiah, the one anointed by God to help and teach us. Jesus is God’s Christmas present to the world.

### Sermon Starter

Advent in Year A of the Revised Common Lectionary is complementary to preaching a series of biographical sermons focusing on the various characters in the Advent story. The series may begin with the Hebrew prophet Isaiah, who stands in as the representative of all the biblical prophets, who are otherwise read in Year C. Isaiah lived during the monotheistic reforms of King Hezekiah, as well as the Assyrian siege of Jerusalem. The Book of Proto-Isaiah (1—39) is also strongly shaped by the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel at the hands of the Assyrians in 722 BCE. Where is hope to be found during times of such traumatic despair, when we may have concluded that God’s wrath and anger has been kindled against us? Many of us have also experienced tragic loss in our lives. In our century, after 18 years of warfare and over 50,000 people killed in the Afghan war, can we yet imagine Isaiah’s peaceful vision of “swords into ploughshares”? In what ways has Jesus, seen as the promised Messiah, presented us with the hope for reconciliation with God? Is similar reconciliation possible with those whom we have warred against these many years?

### Hymns

***Isaiah 2:1–5***

VU 1 “O come, O come, Emmanuel”

VU 8 “Lo, how a rose e’er blooming”

VU 680 “Isaiah the prophet has written of old”

VU 687 “When will people cease their fighting?”

*Psalm 122*

VU 682 “O day of peace”

VU p. 846 “I joyed when to the house of God”

MV 221 “I am walking the path of peace”

*Romans 13:11–14*

VU 22 “Wait for the Lord”

VU 711 “Sleepers, wake”

MV 82 “Bathe me in your light”

*Matthew 24:36–44*

VU 473 “Let all mortal flesh keep silence”

### Service Music for Advent

*Advent Wreath Lighting*

VU 6 “A candle is burning”

VU 7 “Hope is a star”

MV 220 “Hope shines as the solitary star”

*Offering*

VU 55 “In the bleak midwinter” *verse 4*

*Sending Forth*

VU 964 “Go now in peace”

MV 220 “Hope shines as the solitary star”

## December 8 – Advent 2

Isaiah 11:1–10

The peaceable reign of God.

Psalm 72:1–7, 18–19 (VU p. 790 Parts One and Three)

A just ruler.

Romans 15:4–13

The root of Jesse and hope of Gentiles.

Matthew 3:1–12

John the Baptist preaches.

To Ponder

How do you navigate between the cultural Christmas and the Christian Advent Christmas in this season?

### Spark

Place your baptismal font prominently in the front of the church. Beside it, place a pitchfork and a pair of sandals.

### With Children

December 6 is St. Nicholas’ Day. What a great reason for St. Nicholas to visit! Begin by sharing the story of the historical St. Nicholas of Myra and how he became the patron saint of children. Once the story has concluded, “Ol’ Saint Nick,” dressed in the garb of an ancient bishop, can make a grand entrance, perhaps to a rendition of “Here comes Santa Claus.” Children can have a few moments to share what they’d like for Christmas. Then St. Nicholas can turn the question around and ask how they will follow his example and give to others this Christmas, gently reminding them that this is what we do as those who follow Jesus. St. Nicholas may have some treats to share with them. (*Beware of food allergies.*)

### Sermon Starter

Drawing attention to the pitchfork and sandals, mention that Matthew’s version of John the Baptist is probably the most colourful in the Bible. (This helps if you are continuing with the theme of biographical sermons.) Another helpful detail in the Matthew passage is John’s reference to Isaiah, which may serve as a bridge from last week’s sermon. One should be cautious about exploring the entirety of John’s life in the sermon, as you will end up with John dead before he can baptize Jesus six Sundays later, and you’ll want to keep something to talk about once the Baptism of Jesus Sunday arrives. Rather, focus on John’s insistence on the need for personal transformation before the kingdom of God arrives, as well as his rejection of what we’d refer to as “cultural Christianity,” which is at its worst in the Christmas season. Can we match the urgency with which John the Baptist speaks to the crowds?

### Hymns

*Isaiah 11:1–10*

VU 1 “O come, O come, Emmanuel”

VU 8 “Lo, how a rose e’er blooming”

VU 680 “Isaiah the prophet has written of old”

*Psalm 72:1–7, 18–19*

VU 409 “Morning has broken”

VU 410 “This day God gives me”

VU p. 901 “Song of Zechariah”

*Romans 15:4–13*

VU 4 “God of all places”

VU 424 “May the God of hope go with us”

*Matthew 3:1–12*

VU 10 “Prepare the way of the Lord”

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

VU 20 “On Jordan’s bank”

VU 441 “Praise and thanksgiving”

VU 449 “Crashing waters at creation”

## December 15 – Advent 3

Isaiah 35:1–10

The desert blooms and rejoices.

Psalm 146:5–10 (VU p. 868)

God’s reign brings justice.

or Luke 1:47–55 (VU pp. 898–899)

Mary’s song of justice.

James 5:7–10

Wait patiently for the coming of the Lord.

Matthew 11:2–11

John’s disciples visit Jesus.

To Ponder

With whom do you identify most in the narrative of the birth of Jesus?

Spark

Consider a meditative moment during the service to play a musical recording of “Mary, did you know?” (Mark Lowry and Buddy Greene). This can be accompanied by a slide show of artwork depicting Mary.

### With Children

Invite the children to think about some of their favourite movies. Do any of the characters ever burst out into song? Ask them what exciting thing would have to happen in their life for them to burst into song. Connect this with Mary bursting into song when she learns that she will give birth to Jesus. When something amazing happens in our lives, we have words to give thanks to God and express the wonder of the moment. We can sing or say, “Praise to God” or shout “Praise God!” together. Pick a simple version of Mary’s Song (The Magnificat) and have the children repeat the words phrase by phrase.

Sermon Starter

For the third Sunday of Advent, consider using the suggested alternative psalm reading from Luke 1, focusing of the character of Mary, the mother of Jesus. A sermon that explores the question of Mary’s virginity is perhaps not so helpful to the broader themes of Advent. Instead, consider what we do know about this young woman, Mary, and the weight of responsibility God gave to her to raise the promised Messiah. Reflect on Mary’s immediate response to the angel in the words of her Magnificat: “My spirit rejoices” and “from now on, all generations will call me blessed.” On the Sunday of joy, contrast Mary’s joyful response to the news of her pregnancy with the tragic fate that awaits her on Good Friday. This is a sobering reminder of the penitential and reflective aspects of Advent as a season. Explore the other words and phrases of her song. What would draw a young woman in Galilee to sing these words?

Hymns

*Isaiah 35:1–10*

VU 5 “All earth is waiting”

VU 23 “Joy shall come”

VU 222 “Come, let us sing”

*Psalm 146:5–10*

VU 24 “Let the heavens be glad”

VU 30 “Hail to God’s own anointed”

*Luke 1:47–55*

VU 12 “She walked in the summer”

VU 14 “To a maid whose name was Mary”

VU 16 “Mary, woman of the promise”

VU 73 “The virgin Mary had a baby boy”

VU p. 899 “My soul gives glory to my God”

MV 120 “My soul cries out”

MV 134 “There was a child in Galilee”

*James 5:7–10*

VU 9 “People, look east”

VU 320 “Mothering God, you gave me birth”

*Matthew 11:2–11*

VU 10 “Prepare the way of the Lord”

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

## December 22 – Advent 4

Isaiah 7:10–16

The sign of Emmanuel.

Psalm 80:1–7, 17–19 (VU p. 794 Part One)

Shine forth and save us.

Romans 1:1–7

Paul states his authority and belief.

Matthew 1:18–25

Joseph’s dream.

To Ponder

To what responsibility do you feel God has called you? What part of this responsibility have you put upon yourself, rather than responding to a call from God?

Spark

Place a carpenter’s square and woodworking tools on the communion table, as visible symbols of Jesus’ father, Joseph.

With Children

A rehearsed Christmas pageant is great if your church has the means, but no matter how small your congregation is, a little drama goes a long way in worship. Consider holding a spontaneous Christmas pageant, where roles are assigned on the spot and the characters act out the roles in real time, with a narrator. Be sure to include the adults. To fit with the biographical preaching series, be sure to include appearances from Isaiah, John the Baptist, Mary, and Joseph.

Sermon Starter

A focus on Joseph the carpenter brings to a conclusion the theme of biblical characters present in the Advent readings. Begin with the genealogy presented to us in Matthew’s gospel and expand upon the idea of a promised messiah from the line of King David and its original meaning for a restoration of the Davidic monarchy. Judea does have a king in the time of Jesus, Herod Antipas, a king approved and appointed by Rome, loosely connected to the Davidic line. So, what does restoration actually mean, then? Contrast Jesus’ royal heritage with his father Joseph, an average working-class man. Similar to last week’s sermon on Mary, consider the responsibility with which God entrusts Joseph, and the reassurance that the angel offers him. This responsibility becomes real very quickly, as Matthew tells us the holy family will flee as refugees to Egypt soon after Jesus’ birth.

Hymns

*Isaiah 7:10–16*

VU 1 “O come, O come, Emmanuel”

VU 5 “All earth is waiting”

MV 11 “Come, come Emmanuel”

*Psalm 80:1–7, 17–19*

VU 2 “Come thou long-expected Jesus”

VU 17 “O ancient love”

*Romans 1:1–7*

VU 25 “Lo, he comes with clouds descending”

VU 28 “Herald! Sound the note of gladness”

*Matthew 1:18–25*

VU 27 “Tomorrow Christ is coming”

VU 31 “O Lord, how shall I meet you”

MV 47 “Born in human likeness”

## December 24 – Christmas Eve

*Worship materials for December 24 to January 5 were contributed by the Gathering Advisory Board.*

*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.

To Ponder

What is your definition of a godly, upright life?

Spark

Project or display images of the baby Jesus from many different cultures.

With Children

Invite the children to consider some of the images of Jesus’ birth. What do they notice? Jesus came as a gift for the whole world. We don’t actually know what Jesus looked like so we can imagine him in many different ways. Each of these images reflects something about the amazing gift of Jesus. If you have a manger set up for the service, invite the children to gather around it and share their prayers for the world this night. Or you might give each child a figure from the manger scene and ask what that character might pray for this night. Conclude with a repeat-after-me prayer that draws together the children’s prayers.

Sermon Starter

Titus exhorts his readers to live a “godly and upright” life as they await the return of Jesus. We have many ideas about what a godly and upright life should be. Our society gives us many messages about a good life, a successful life, a valued life. We have expectations from the families in which we grew up about what a good and upright life should be. If we carefully consider the story of Jesus’ birth, what do we learn about a godly and upright life? Quite likely, it isn’t the same message as what we are fed by our society. The goodness and faithfulness of the people who first welcomed Jesus are found outside the norms and expectations of society. Jesus was born in a stable to peasant parents. The whole scene was not pretty or well put together. It all happened in a somewhat chaotic and unplanned way. The goodness, faithfulness, and godliness of those involved are found in their willingness and courage to respond to God’s call, coming just as they were, with no pretense or show. They didn’t have it all figured out. They weren’t considered the most successful or glamorous in their society. They were godly and upright because they offered themselves as they were, with all the love they had, to welcome Jesus.

Hymns

In addition to the many favourite hymns and carols:

VU 40 “Before the marvel of this night”

VU 49 “No crowded eastern street”

VU 56 “Jesus, our brother”

VU 58 “Infant holy, infant lowly”

VU 70 “There’s a star in the East”

VU 78 “Sing till sundown”

VU 508 “Just as I am”

MV 134 “There was a child in Galilee”

MV 158 “Dream a dream”

## December 25 – Christmas Day (Wednesday)

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.

To Ponder

What is your relationship to preparation? Do you prefer to be fully prepared or to go with the flow?

Spark

Invite people to share a scripture or a character in one of the biblical stories that has been particularly meaningful to them this Advent-Christmas season.

With Children

Preparing. What does it mean to prepare? How do we prepare for a vacation? For Christmas? For visitors? For a new baby in our home? If Jesus were coming to visit us here, in this congregation, would he feel welcome? How would we prepare for Jesus’ visit? How would we make him feel welcome? The amazing thing is that we don’t have to wait. We can welcome each other and anyone who comes through our doors as if we are welcoming Jesus. Are we prepared?

Sermon Starter

The Isaiah passage gives the warning, “Prepare a way!” and invites everyone to be ready for the people who will come. They are to go to great lengths to be ready: Post sentinels. Open the gates. Clear the rocks off the road. Raise the flag. In contrast, the shepherds have no time to prepare. The angels surprise them in the fields, and they rush off to Bethlehem to find the baby of which the angels sang. (What happened to their sheep? No time to plan for the care of the flock.) The shepherds have to come as they are. They are going to greet the Messiah, but there is no time to change clothes or wash up.

As you arrive at this Christmas Day, do you feel prepared or unprepared to welcome the Christ child? What do you bring with you to the manger—the parts of you that you love, the parts you find uncomfortable, the parts of you not accepted by your family or the world? At the manger, you are welcomed as you are. You have something to offer, as did the shepherds, unprepared as they were. This is a place where you are not judged, not by yourself, by others, or by the world.

Hymns

*Isaiah 62:6–12*

VU 10 “Prepare the way of the Lord”

MV 217 “Hey ney yana”

*Luke 2:(1–7), 8–20*

VU 36 “Angels, from the realms of glory”

VU 38 “Angels we have heard on high”

VU 40 “Before the marvel of this night”

VU 44 “It came upon the midnight clear”

VU 48 “Hark! the herald angels sing”

VU 52 “Sheep fast asleep”

VU 68 “All poor ones and humble”

VU 73 “The virgin Mary had a baby boy”

VU 76 “See amid the winter’s snow”

MV 157 “I am a child of God”

MV 161 “I have called you by your name”

## December 29 – First Sunday after Christmas

Isaiah 63:7–9

God’s presence has saved us.

Psalm 148 (VU pp. 870–871)

Let all creation praise God.

Hebrews 2:10–18

Jesus, the pioneer of salvation.

Matthew 2:13–23

The escape to Egypt.

To Ponder

Where have you found sanctuary in your life?

Spark

Focus on making the sanctuary a true sanctuary for this worship service. Make prayer shawls available if you have them, or blankets to wrap up in. Pillows. A teapot. Welcome signs. What would create a sense of safety, rest, and home?

With Children

What is a sanctuary? Well, it is this place where we gather to worship, but sanctuary also means “a safe place where we can rest unafraid.” For Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, Egypt became their sanctuary until it was safe to return to Israel. Invite the children to think about their safe spaces. What makes them safe (e.g., the place, the people)? How can we make this sanctuary a true sanctuary for everyone who comes here? Engage with some of the items mentioned in the Spark.

Sermon Starter

Matthew’s story of the escape of the holy family to Egypt is a reversal of the Moses story, where the people of Israel must flee slavery in Egypt to find sanctuary in the wilderness. In both stories, the place of sanctuary is an unknown place, an unexpected place to find safety. Consider refugees today who must flee a situation of hunger or violence. Consider how the unknown (place, future, people) can become sanctuary and safety. How does your congregation intentionally live out the mission of being a sanctuary?

Hymns

*Isaiah 63:7–9*

VU 6 “A candle is burning”

MV 84 “In you there is a refuge”

*Psalm 148*

VU 45 “Joy is now in every place”

VU 240 “Praise, my soul, the God of heaven”

*Hebrews 2:10–18*

VU 55 “In the bleak midwinter”

VU 72 “From heaven above to earth I come”

MV 47 “Born in human likeness”

MV 166 “Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ”

*Matthew 2:13–23*

VU 54 “Unto us a boy is born”

VU 74 “What child is this”

VU 77 “In Bethlehem a newborn boy”

VU 91 “The first Nowell”

MV 111 “A voice was heard in Ramah”

“The Coventry carol (Lully, lullay)” (Robert Croo)

## January 1 – New Year’s Day

Ecclesiastes 3:1–13

For everything, there is a season.

Psalm 8 (VU pp. 730–732)

What are humans that God is mindful of them?

Revelation 21:1–6*a*

A new heaven and a new earth.

Matthew 25:31–46

Judging the sheep and the goats.

To Ponder

What does it mean to say that God has placed eternity on our hearts?

Spark

Decorate the space with items (or project images) from the past year, especially ones that relate to the contrasts of Ecclesiastes. Also include symbols of the year to come. In the centre (or at the end of the slide show), place a circle.

With Children

What are some of your New Year’s traditions? Are traditions of various cultures part of the congregation or community? Many New Year’s traditions express a desire for God to bless the coming year and a hope for new possibilities. Revelation 21 invites us to leave some things behind as we embrace the New Year with God at the centre. If you have created a display, explore the images, ending with the circle. Our planet circles the sun. The year is like a circle as well. Always at the centre is God. We can trust that is true as we move into whatever the new year holds.

Sermon Starter

Ecclesiastes 3 presents a series of contrasts, a series of situations that encapsulate all of human experience. We ponder this each year as we reflect on all that has happened over the previous 12 months. Media outlets compile lists and show video clips of the year to help us remember. Yet, God has placed eternity on our hearts. What does it mean to step out of the cycle of what comes each year? How do we live in the present of the moment rather than wonder what experience will come next or continue to relive past experiences? How might living in the present moment be a spiritual practice for your congregation: delighting, savouring, and enjoying the present worship and mission rather than worrying about shrinking church numbers and whether the church will exist in the future, not longing for the glory days of the past? Ecclesiastes 3 speaks to balance in life. How is the balance of your life? Of your congregation’s life together? How do you live with eternity placed in your hearts?

Hymns

*Ecclesiastes 3:1–13*

VU 111 “As the sun with longer journey”

VU 226 “For the beauty of the earth”

VU 530 “All beautiful the march of days”

VU 703 “In the bulb there is a flower”

*Psalm 8*

VU 238 “How Great Thou Art”

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

MV 44 “Shadow and substance”

*Revelation 21:1–6*a

VU 713 “I see a new heaven”

VU p. 801 “How lovely, God”

MV 10 “Come and seek the ways of Wisdom”

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

MV 199 “When at this table”

*Matthew 25:31–46*

VU 227 “For the fruit of all creation”

VU 592 “Come, now, you blessed”

VU 600 “When I needed a neighbour”

MV 114 “Behold the face of Christ”

## January 5 – Second Sunday after Christmas

Jeremiah 31:7–14

I will gather them in, turn mourning into joy.

Psalm 147:12–20 (VU pp. 868–869 Part Two)

God sends God’s word to earth.

Ephesians 1:3–14

Destined for adoption as God’s children.

John 1:(1–9), 10–18

The Word became flesh; we have seen his glory.

To Ponder

What significant choices have you made in life? How have they shaped you?

Spark

Create a display of boxes of different sizes and shapes, wrapped in paper of various textures, colours, weights, from tissue paper and wrapping paper to brown paper and newspaper. You might also add wood of different shapes, some stones, etc. Diversity is key.

With Children

Have a selection of small, wrapped gifts from which the children can choose, containing treats. (Be aware of food allergies if offering food treats.) Invite them to wait to open the gifts. Ask each child why they chose the gift box they did. Make the link to the Ephesians and Jeremiah readings: just as each child has chosen a specific box for a certain reason, so, too, God has chosen each of us for unique and specific reasons. We are all loved as we are. God has called us, and God is ready to take care of us, to comfort us, and to celebrate with us. Now ask them to open the gifts.

Sermon Starter

Just as God chose Jesus, God has specifically chosen each of us. It is no accident that we are here. We may think that we have chosen God, but God chose us first, to become children of God. How does that change your approach to living as disciples of the Way of Jesus, knowing that it is God’s choice to call you, and only your choice as to how you will respond? In the letter to the Ephesians, Paul uses the example of adoption. Adoption has not always been a happy or successful process: there has been secrecy around it; young mothers have been forced into releasing their children; Indigenous children have been ripped from their families and placed into White families. This could be an opportunity to acknowledge the pain of adoption and the pain of not knowing. However, in God’s realm, adoption is not about secrecy and ripping apart families. Adoption is about blessing, healing, mending, inclusion, and making room for everyone.

Hymns

*Jeremiah 31:7–14*

VU 658 “O Love that wilt not let me go”

MV 156 “Dance with the Spirit”

MV 161 “I have called you by your name”

*Psalm 147:12–20*

VU 541 “Praise God from whom all blessings flow”

MV 37 “Each blade of grass”

*Ephesians 1:3–14*

VU 291 “All things bright and beautiful”

VU 559 “Come, O Fount of every blessing”

MV 167 “Hush! Hush!”

*John 1:(1–9), 10–18*

VU 84 “O radiant Christ, incarnate Word”

VU 499 “O Christ, the Word incarnate”

MV 64 “Because you came”

MV 157 “I am a child of God”

Dramatic Reading of John 1:6–14

Reader 1: John 1:6–7

Reader 2: John 1:8–13 (*This could be done in the first person, speaking in the voice of John, “I am not the light…”*)

**All sing:** VU 87 “I am the light of the world” *refrain only*

Reader 1: John 1:14

**All sing:** VU 60 “O come, all ye faithful” *refrain only*

***Dianne Young,*** *St. Martin’s U.C., Saskatoon, Sask.*

## January 6 – Epiphany (Monday)

*Worship materials for January 6 to January 26 were contributed by Catherine Tovell, Kilworth U.C., Komoka, Ont.*

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.

To Ponder

When has light been a negative experience for you? When has dark been positive? How do those experiences inform your reading of Isaiah?

Spark

Make a display of items that use light, or simply place them around the sanctuary. Examples could include a digital projector and various styles and vintages of cameras and flashlights.

With Children

Choose a camera from the display. (If it is possible to have a Polaroid-type camera with automatically developing photos, that would be awesome.) Talk about how a camera works, or invite a congregation member who knows photography to help you. Explain how light and dark are used with this item. A beautiful photograph is created when a balance of light and dark is allowed in through the lens: the balance of two gifts God provides for us every day.

Sermon Starter

Challenge long-held the assumptions about light and dark and examine how these are reflected in imagery. Barbara Brown Taylor’s book *Learning to Walk in the Dark* (HarperOne, 2014) is a good resource. Since light is a dominant image throughout Epiphany, time spent reading this book is well worth it. Traditionally, within White culture, darkness has been associated with difficulty, risk, evil, or calamity. But let’s remember that darkness also is a comforting time, a time for healing and renewal, a time of growth (for a seed in the earth or in the womb), and a time for sleep (away from bright light). Light can be negative. It can cause sunburns, play havoc with sleep cycles, and dry out the fields. The first family fled to safety in Egypt under the cover of darkness—darkness was their safety. The wise men travelled from the east during both light and dark periods. They needed both. Talk about how the negative associations given to darkness have been used to support racism. Scriptures such as Isaiah 9 and Isaiah 60 have been used to feed racist attitudes and actions. Epiphany is a time of new insights. What new insights can people engage in worship concerning the racism that is embedded in our language and our society? Search *United Church Canada racism* on the Internet to find the many resources the United Church has to offer related to the reality of racism. Also look for information on the UN International Decade for People of African Descent.

Hymns

*Isaiah 60:1–6*

VU 84 “O radiant Christ, incarnate Word”

VU 87 “I am the light of the world”

VU 98 “How brightly beams the Morning Star”

VU 679 “Let there be light”

*Psalm 72:1–7, 10–14*

VU 30 “Hail to God’s own anointed”

MV 135 “Called by earth and sky”

*Ephesians 3:1–12*

VU 43 “Go, tell it on the mountain”

MV 12 “Come touch our hearts”

*Matthew* 2:1–12

VU 62 “Once in royal David’s city”

VU 68 “All poor ones and humble”

VU 87 “I am the light of the world”

*General*

VU 79 “Arise, your light is come”

VU 97 “When a Star is shining”

VU 588 “Many are the lightbeams”

## January 12 – Baptism of the Lord Sunday

Isaiah 42:1–9

God’s servant brings justice.

Psalm 29 (VU p. 756)

Ascribe to God all glory and strength.

Acts 10:34–43

Peter’s sermon to the Gentiles.

Matthew 3:13–17

Jesus is baptized.

To Ponder

What is the purpose of baptism in the 21st century?

Spark

Invite congregation members to bring mementos or pictures of baptisms (their own, or their children’s or grandchildren’s) to make a display for this Sunday.

With Children

If you are having baptisms today, explain the sacrament to the children and then involve them in it (e.g., pouring the water, laying hands on the child to bless them). If there are a lot of children, have them all circle the families gathered around the font. If you are not having baptisms today, invite some of the congregation members who have brought mementos and pictures to share their stories with the children. If you can, invite people from different generations to share their stories, so that changes across time can be noted even as you point out what is always involved: water, God’s love, promises, and a community.

Sermon Starter

A focal point in the Matthew 3 lesson is verse 14*b*, when John says, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” John sees his position as the baptizer of Jesus as a reversal of roles. Use this theme of role reversal to explore how different roles get reversed when one lives out the kingdom or gospel values, rather than the values of our world. In the not-too-distant past, people just assumed that we were all living gospel values in our society. Now, we can’t assume that everything in our society reflects what Jesus taught. How do we discern? Where is the greatest tension today as we seek to live gospel values in our society? How do we support one another in following the Way of Jesus?

Hymns

*Isaiah 42:1–9*

VU 79 “Arise, your light is come”

VU 330 “Jesus shall reign”

MV 135 “Called by earth and sky”

*Psalm 29*

VU 173 “Thine is the glory”

VU 229 “God of the sparrow”

VU 314 “Come now, almighty King”

VU 686 “God of grace and God of glory”

*Acts 10:34–43*

VU 326 “O for a thousand tongues to sing”

MV 85 “Take, O take me as I am”

*Matthew 3:13–17*

VU 453 “Out of deep, unordered water”

VU 710 “Shall we gather at the river”

MV 3 “River”

MV 4 “All who are thirsty”

## January 19 – Second Sunday after Epiphany

Isaiah 49:1–7

The mission of God’s servant.

Psalm 40:1–11 (VU p. 764)

I waited patiently for God.

1 Corinthians 1:1–9

I thank God for you.

John 1:29–42

Simon and Andrew become disciples.

To Ponder

In this digital age, what does it mean to receive a call? What about a spiritual call?

Spark

Place different kinds of puzzles around the worship space. These could include (but not be limited to) a jigsaw, 3-D, and Rubik’s cube.

With Children

Talk about puzzles with the children. Pick a jigsaw from the display. Give each child a piece of the puzzle and then put it together. Talk with the children about how everyone received a piece of the puzzle but everyone’s was different, unique. When combined, they all fit together to make a complete puzzle. Use this concrete metaphor to talk about God’s people. We are all different and unique, and each one of us has a special place to fit into the whole puzzle of God’s creation. If even one of us is missing, the whole is not complete, just like a puzzle with one piece missing is not complete. We all have a role to play and gifts to give to share God’s love in this world.

Sermon Starter

Perhaps continue the puzzle analogy in the sermon by talking about different kinds of calls for different people. When each of us accepts the call that is placed on us and then works together with other equally unique and different people, God’s shalom is realized. When we can’t or won’t accept the unique—if sometimes seemingly odd—call that God extends to us, then the puzzle does not fit. You might invite various people in the congregation to share their story of being called by God to the work (volunteer or paid) they do, or their story of how they feel called to follow the Way of Jesus in whatever they are doing. That is discipleship.

Hymns

*Isaiah 49:1–7*

VU 87 “I am the light of the world”

VU 96 “Will you come and see the light”

VU 264 “Immortal, invisible, God only wise”

VU 342 “You servants of God”

VU 507 “Today we all are called to be disciples”

*Psalm 40:1–11*

VU 652 “Be still, my soul”

MV 20 “God of still waiting”

*1 Corinthians 1:1–9*

MV 2 “Come all you people”

MV 8 “And on this path”

*John 1:29–42*

VU 504 “How clear is our vocation, Lord”

VU 563 “Jesus, you have come to the lakeshore”

VU 567 “Will you come and follow me”

VU 570 “Jesus’ hands were kind hands”

## January 26 – Third Sunday after Epiphany

Isaiah 9:1–4

The people have seen a great light.

Psalm 27:1, 4–9 (VU pp. 753–755)

God is my light and my salvation.

1 Corinthians 1:10–18

Overcome divisions and find unity.

Matthew 4:12–23

Jesus begins his ministry.

To Ponder

Do we have to answer everyone who calls? How do we discern God’s call amid life’s many calls to us?

Spark

Make a display of various types of communication equipment (or use pictures of them). These could include an old telephone, a walkie-talkie, Morse code or teletype machines, typewriters, various types and models of cellphones, etc.

With Children

Today offers an opportunity to demystify the term *repentance* for the children. Using one of the older (i.e., outdated) communication devices, try to contact one of the children. Ask them why they receive your message. Invite them to consider what might help the message come through (e.g., moving to a different spot in the worship space, batteries, using a different receiving device, or having instructions).

Now talk about *repentance* as you physically turn yourself around, explaining to the children that repentance simply means to turn oneself around. Have them do the action with you so that they can notice how things look different when they turn around. Draw the analogy between the communication device and the turning around, to make the point that sometimes we have to do something different (repent) in order to receive God’s message for us.

Sermon Starter

If the Isaiah passage is the focus of the sermon, you might like to revisit the light and dark metaphors and associations introduced on Epiphany. Is light always good? No! Do bad things happen only in the dark? No! Expand the discussion of how racism has been fuelled by these associations. Reflect on what White privilege means in your context. If there are those in the congregation who would feel comfortable sharing a story as someone who has been racialized or who has racialized others, invite them to share, being careful to create a safe and supportive context for the sharing. What steps will you take as a congregation to turn things around on racism?

The 1 Corinthians passage lends itself to a discussion of “holy manners” and why they are important. Matthew continues the theme of calling. Notice in the passage that Jesus calls Simon and Andrew after he issues a call to repentance (turning oneself around). Sometimes we have to turn ourselves around (repent) before we can hear God’s call.

Hymns

*Isaiah 9:1–4*

VU 83 “Break forth, O beauteous heavenly light”

VU 336 “Christ whose glory fills the skies”

*Psalm 27:1, 4–9*

VU 657 “He leadeth me”

VU p. 822 “All people that on earth do dwell”

MV 84 “In you there is a refuge”

*1 Corinthians 1:10–18*

VU 271 “There’s a wideness in God’s mercy”

VU 372 “Though I may speak”

VU 676 “God, make us servants of your peace”

*Matthew 4:12–23*

VU 288 “Great is thy faithfulness”

VU 508 “Just as I am”

VU 562 “Jesus calls us”

VU 608 “Dear God, who loves all humankind”

VU 626 “I heard the voice of Jesus”

VU 658 “O Love that wilt not let me go”

VU 681 “Where cross the crowded ways of life”

MV 97 “Listen, God is calling”

## February 2 – Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

*Worship materials were contributed by Kim Vidal, Bells Corners U.C., Nepean, Ont.*

Micah 6:1–8

What does God require of us?

Psalm 15 (VU p. 736)

Who may be a guest in God’s house?

1 Corinthians 1:18–31

God’s foolishness is better than human wisdom.

Matthew 5:1–12

Blessed are the poor in spirit.

To Ponder

What was Jesus’ purpose in declaring that those who are grieving and in poverty are blessed?

Spark

As people come in, hand each of them a small piece of coloured paper with the caption “Blessed are the \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ for they shall \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.” During a moment of silent reflection in the service, ask the people, young and old, to write their own beatitudes and share them with the person sitting beside them. Collect the beatitudes after the service and post them for everyone to reflect upon.

With Children

Talk about the words *blessings* and *blessed*. Ask the children what it means to be blessed. It means to be made holy or sacred, to be given special attention by God. It also means bliss or happiness. How could someone be blessed? Talk about the Beatitudes in Matthew. (Beatitude = blessing.) Why would Jesus say that someone who is poor or hungry or sad is blessed? Look at the second part of each statement. Tell the children that sometimes we think of the beatitudes as “be-attitudes,” that they are to “be” one’s “attitude” for rightful living. What do these wise words of Jesus tell us that will guide us in our relationships and in making choices?

Sermon Starter

What are beatitudes? They are not entry requirements we must meet for God to accept us. In fact, each beatitude is a gift that calls for our response. They are codes of behaviour for shaping a community of faith in ways that call conventional wisdom into question, that subvert the status quo and intend eventually to reshape it. How can these words reshape a world in need of healing? Think of war-torn countries or a mother burying her child. Think of those dying and suffering from dreaded illnesses and leaving their families too soon. Think of those who are in abusive relationships or those who are marginalized because of their gender, race, or creed. How could Jesus say that there is any sort of blessing in this messy world? How could Jesus call someone with an empty belly and aching grief blessed? What about those who were on the other side of the fence—the affluent, the educated, the famous, and the successful? Are they not also blessed? What is the good news of the Beatitudes? Refer to Frederick Buechner’s writing on the Beatitudes (Internet search*: Frederick Buechner beatitudes*).

Hymns

*Micah 6:1–8*

VU 512 “Lord, you give the great commission”

VU 701 “What does the Lord require of you”

VU 702 “When a poor one”

MV 171 “Christ has no body now but yours”

*Psalm 15*

MV 1 “Let us build a house”

MV 29 “How lovely is your dwelling place”

*1 Corinthians 1:18–31*

VU 642 “Be thou my vision”

VU 654 “All my hope is firmly grounded”

*Matthew 5:1–12*

VU 684 “Make me a channel of your peace”

VU 686 “God of grace and God of glory”

VU p. 896 “Blest are they”

MV 12 “Come touch our hearts”

MV 195 “Long ago and far away”

## February 9 – Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

*Worship materials were contributed by Lorrie Lowes and Sue Morrison, Bells Corners U.C., Nepean, Ont.*

Isaiah 58:1–9*a*, (9*b*–12)

The fast that God chooses.

Psalm 112:1–9, (10) (VU p. 834)

Delight in God’s commandments.

1 Corinthians 2:1–12, (13–16)

Wisdom through God’s Spirit.

Matthew 5:13–20

You are salt; you are light.

To Ponder

How might our own world view hinder us from understanding the metaphors that Jesus used?

Spark

Include a Himalayan salt lamp in the worship centre, or a string of low-temperature white Christmas lights in a glass bowl of rock salt crystals.

With Children

Show the children a salt shaker and ask what we use salt for. Why do we do it? Because it makes things taste better! Salt is used for other things, too. It can be used for preserving foods so that they can be kept for a long time without spoiling (important in Jesus’ time!). It can also be used to heal. (Have you ever used a salt-and-warm-water rinse when you have a sore spot in your mouth?) You need some salt (not too much) in your diet to stay healthy. Jesus asks us to be salt for the world. How can we, as Christians, do this? We can make people’s lives better, take care of the earth, and help heal things that are hurt or broken.

Show a flashlight or lantern. What does a light do? Explore the gift of light. (Remember not to make darkness bad or evil. Darkness, too, is a needed gift). How can we, as Christians, be like light in the world? Let’s remember to be salty and bright!

Sermon Starter

How would the people of Jesus’ time and place understand his call for us to be the salt and light of the world? In *At Home: A Short History of Private Life* (Doubleday, 2013), author Bill Bryson reminds us of “just how painfully dim the world was before electricity.” In a world where we are concerned about light pollution and the negative impacts of light on our sleep patterns and health, light may not seem as rare and precious as it did to ancient people, whose nights were lit only by the stars and moon and where only the relatively well off could afford candles or oil lamps. The vast majority would have only lit a light if they had to be out and about at night. To be the light is to illuminate the reality and the truth, to show the shape and nature of what is really there, and to identify and avoid dangers.

Salt has been a valuable commodity with several important life-supporting characteristics. But today, salt is inexpensive and overused in our foods to the point of causing us health problems. Salt has taken over as a primary flavour enhancer in prepared foods and replaces the use of other flavours that make food interesting. Large-scale crop irrigation causes problematic salinization of our farmers’ soil. Use of salt to melt ice pollutes water and kills plants and fish. In Jesus’ day, it was difficult and expensive to obtain salt. In a world without refrigeration or antibiotics, salt was an important means of killing germs and preserving food. In a hot climate, where everything got done by manual labour, much salt was lost from the body in sweat, and replacing it was critical. Salt supported human life. To be salt, in such a world, is to be a valuable necessity for preserving and enhancing a healthy, wholesome, and abundant human life. What are the implications of the call to be light and salt in our modern world?

Hymns

Isaiah 58:1–9*a*

VU 701 “What does the Lord require of you”

MV 44 “Shadow and substance”

MV 58 “We sing of your glory”

MV 78 “God weeps”

*Psalm 112:1–9*

VU 356 “Seek ye first the kingdom”

*1 Corinthians 2:1–12*

VU 642 “Be thou my vision”

MV 79 “Spirit, open my heart”

*Matthew 5:13–20*

VU 82 “A light is gleaming”

VU 646 “We are marching”

VU 679 “Let there be light”

## February 16 – Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

*Worship materials were contributed by Peggy Aitchison and Susan Young, Bells Corners U.C., Nepean, Ont.*

Deuteronomy 30:15–20

Choose life.

Psalm 119:1–8 (VU p. 838 Part One)

Happy are those who walk in God’s ways.

1 Corinthians 3:1–9

Not ready for solid food.

Matthew 5:21–37

Teachings on anger, adultery, divorce, and oaths.

To Ponder

Is your life in tune with God’s kingdom, where compassion, justice, and integrity meet?

Spark

Display a stick, a stone, a cellphone, and perhaps some tools, toys, or other objects, with the caption “Safe or dangerous?”

With Children

Ask the children if they have ever heard the saying “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” Discuss the meaning of this saying and then ask if they agree or disagree. What do they think Jesus would have taught? Explain that Jesus points out that both our actions and our words can do a lot of harm.

Sermon Starter

In Matthew 5:21–37, Matthew builds a bridge between the ancient law and Jesus’ teachings. He compares and contrasts the traditional view of justice that centres on outward actions with Jesus’ view and its focus on inward reflection. He emphasizes the importance of Jesus’ teachings by using hyperbole and some unforgettably violent imagery, as he offers examples of wrongdoing and harsh punishments for transgressions. Although he seems to quote Jesus directly, Matthew’s words do not sound like those of the compassionate Jesus we know from other scriptures. Matthew, in his provocative style, is inviting the question, “So then, how does Jesus really say we should live?”

Hymns

*Deuteronomy 30:15–20*

VU 562 “Jesus calls us”

VU 625 “I feel the winds of God”

VU 704 “God give us life”

MV 89 “Love is the touch”

MV 97 “Listen, God is calling”

*Psalm 119:1–8*

VU 232 “Joyful, joyful we adore you”

VU 567 “Will you come and follow me”

MV 10 “Come and seek the ways of Wisdom”

MV 183 “I’m gonna shout, shout”

*1 Corinthians 3:1–9*

VU 560 “O Master, let me walk with thee”

VU 672 “Take time to be holy”

VU 703 “In the bulb there is a flower”

MV 81 “Love us into fullness”

MV 157 “I am a child of God”

*Matthew 5:21–37*

VU 117 “Jesus Christ is waiting”

VU 371 “Open my eyes, that I may see”

VU 430 “God be in my head”

VU 506 “Take my life and let it be”

MV 174 “Soil of God, you and I”

MV 176 “Three things I promise”

## February 23 – Transfiguration Sunday

*Worship materials were contributed by Kim Vidal, Bells Corners U.C., Nepean, Ont.*

Exodus 24:12–18

God calls Moses up the mountain.

Psalm 2 (VU p. 725)

Serve God with holy fear.

or Psalm 99 (VU p. 819)

God delights in justice.

2 Peter 1:16–21

The morning star rises in your hearts.

Matthew 17:1–9

Jesus transfigured on the mountain.

To Ponder

Name some mountaintop experiences you have had. How do these mountaintop moments transform or transfigure you in the here and now?

Spark

As people enter the sanctuary, give each one a lit battery-operated tealight. Listen to the song “I am light” by India.Arie, perhaps while showing the video (available with lyrics on YouTube), and ask the people to reflect on the song with the lit tealight in their hand.

With Children

Talk about Jesus and his disciples climbing up a mountain and how Jesus was transformed. What do you think transformation means? (They may mention toys that transform.) Show them a video clip (either projected or on your phone or tablet) of a butterfly’s metamorphosis from a caterpillar to a beautiful winged creature. Compare the stages of a butterfly’s transformation with that of human beings. Sometimes we are like a caterpillar; other times like a cocoon. And then we have moments of transformation when we become a beautiful butterfly ready to fly where our heart so desires. Let the children reflect on the stages of human transformation, noting that each stage means a different process and different “aha” moments for each of us. Come back to the story of Jesus’ transformation and the reactions of Peter, James, and John.

Sermon Starter

The word *transfiguration* is about change, but it emphasizes a dramatic change in *appearance*. Especially, it means a change that glorifies or exalts somebody. In her lectionary blog (www.bethscib.com/blog), author and theologian Beth Scibienski talks about “nebulous visibility” and “momentary clarity.” Peter had his moment of nebulous visibility when he spontaneously suggested erecting three dwelling places for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. James and John had their moment of nebulous visibility when, upon seeing Jesus transfigured, they were overwhelmed by fear. What is your nebulous visibility moment? Have you had a transformational experience? Has there been a moment when your life was suddenly illuminated? Did a cloud descend upon you, wrap you up, and then release you, and suddenly you knew exactly what you were called to do? With Jesus as an example, it becomes clear that we, too, are meant to be transfigured. We are to be transfigured as his followers of all times and places. We, too, are to shine with Jesus’ presence in our lives, wearing robes of love and compassion, garments of justice and peace. Moments of transfiguration change us, sustain us, prepare us, encourage us, and guide us into the future regardless of the circumstances we face. They show us who we are—the transfigured people of God.

Hymns

*Exodus 24:12–18*

VU 289 “It only takes a spark”

VU 421 “Lead on, O cloud of Presence”

VU 578 “As a fire is meant for burning”

*Psalm 2*

VU 342 “You servants of God”

*Psalm 99*

MV 135 “Called by earth and sky”

MV 154 “Deep in our hearts”

*2 Peter 1:16–21*

VU 585 “Jesus bids us shine”

“This little light of mine” (Harry Dixon Loes)

*Matthew 17:1–9*

VU 82 “A light is gleaming”

VU 87 “I am the light of the world”

VU 646 “We are marching”

MV 82 “Bathe me in your light”

“Shine, Jesus, shine” (Graham Kendrick)