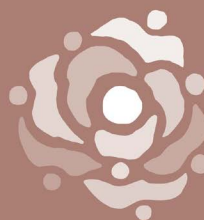


God dwells with us

A CREATIVE LITURGY FOR CHRISTMAS

Written by Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed



FROM
GENERATION
TO GENERATION...
God dwells with us

*We invite you to implement this liturgy as-is, or adapt it for your context. Please attribute credit as follows:
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INTRODUCTION

In the calendar year this liturgy was created and released (2022), Christmas Eve falls on a Saturday, Christmas Day falls on a Sunday, and New Year's Day is the Sunday after. Due to how this schedule may impact your worship and attendance, we have crafted this special creative liturgy for use throughout Christmastide. You may use it for Christmas Day worship or adapt it for any worship service throughout the Christmas season. No matter when you worship, we hope this liturgy helps you create a joyful and gratitude-filled worship experience for this holy season.

MUSIC SUGGESTIONS¹

The order of worship notes where you might include hymns throughout the service.

We encourage you to select familiar and beloved carols and hymns, such as the following:

- “Joy to the World”
(Words: Isaac Watts, Tune: ANTIOCH, c.1719, Public Domain)
- “O Little Town of Bethlehem”
(Words: Phillips Brooks, Tune: ST. LOUIS, c.1868, Public Domain)
- “Go, Tell It On the Mountain”
(Adapter: John W. Work, Tune: GO TELL IT, Public Domain)
- “O Come, All Ye Faithful”
(Words: John Francis Wade, Translator: Frederick Oakeley, Tune: ADESTE FIDELES, c. 1841, Public Domain)

¹ Please find additional hymn ideas on our blog:
sanctifiedart.org/blog/from-generation-to-generation-music-ideas.

SUPPLIES NEEDED

- Advent wreath (*all candles should be lit before the service begins*).
- Candle snuffer (*the liturgist will use this to extinguish the Advent candles throughout the prayer of confession*).
- Taper candle (*the liturgist will use this to relight the Advent candles during the words of forgiveness*).
- One clean sheet of paper for each person (*this can be the size of a bookmark or a small card; we suggest stuffing these papers in the bulletin, leaving them at the end of pews, or passing them out as people arrive, as they will be needed for the prayer of the people*).
- Pens/pencils (*available in the pews or seats*).

ABOUT THE LITURGY OUTLINE

- *Italicized lines are notes for worship leaders.*
 - Unbolded lines are to be spoken by worship leaders and, when appropriate, printed in bulletins or projected on screens.
 - **Bolded lines are to be spoken by the congregation and printed in bulletins or projected on screens.**
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ORDER OF WORSHIP

PRELUDE

Opening music as worshipers gather, determined by the staff and/or music leaders.

WELCOME

Family of faith, Merry Christmas and welcome to worship here at (*name of church*)!

Just last night we gathered together to celebrate Christmas Eve. We lit candles. We told the story. We sang along with the angels. Many of you were here with us. And now, just a few hours later, we are back! Christ has been born. God is good, and our joy overflows.

Before we share logistics about today's service, I want to take a moment to acknowledge that some among us may be a little extra tired, or squirmy, or joyful. Some of us may be eager to return home to family, and some of us may be eager to be here with our church family. Know that however you feel today, whatever joy or weariness you bring into this space, God welcomes all of it, and we do too. We're so glad you're here.

Today's service is a little different from our normal flow, since this is such a unique and special day. In today's service we will sing, we will pray, we will listen, and we will write.

WELCOME (CONT.)

A few things to note to help this service move smoothly: hopefully you received a piece of paper when you entered the sanctuary.² Hold onto that paper for later in the service, as we will use it to write prayer requests. Additionally, at the very end of the service, I am going to invite you, as you are able, to stand up and form one large circle around the edge of the sanctuary during the benediction. There may be a few moments of chaos while we transition, and that is totally okay. If you prefer to remain seated, we will encompass you with the outer circle.

Now, may we all take a deep breath and center ourselves in this place. Christ is born. God has come. We are not alone. Let us celebrate that good news. Let us dwell with God!

Please stand in body or in spirit and join me in a responsive call to worship. With energy and joy, I invite you to repeat each phrase after me. We'll repeat these lines a few times, so please feel free to shout and fill our space with loud celebration. Repeat after me...

CALL TO WORSHIP³

To help set a celebratory and joyful tone, we encourage you to refrain from printing these words and instead lead a vocal call and response. Signal with your hand when it's the congregation's turn. Repeat these four lines several times, growing louder and more joyful in your proclamation as you go. To add to the joy and energy, invite the congregation to stand. They can remain standing for the following hymn.

I have good news!

I have good news!

Christ is born!

Christ is born!

Joy is alive!

Joy is alive!

God is here.

God is here.

(Repeat 3x)

Thanks be to God.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

Amen.

² Alternatively: "You can find a clean sheet of paper in your bulletin."

³ Why do a repeat-after-me call to worship? Great question. We have three reasons: 1) An off-script call to worship sends the message to the congregation that this day is unlike others. 2) A call and response call to worship includes wiggly children, creating space for their Christmas Day joy and energy, while also allowing joy to ring through in an organic way. 3) A repeat-after-me call to worship fills the sanctuary with a "joyful noise" that can help create unity, connection, and energy on a day that may have lower attendance than usual. Have fun with it!

HYMN

Select a hymn from our list of suggestions, or choose another Christmas hymn that your congregation loves.

CALL TO CONFESSION

On a day like today we may want to skip the prayer of confession because today is a day for joy. Why should we pause to think and talk about the ways we as humans mess things up?

I get that argument. However, I also believe that the joy of this day is even more joyful when we are honest about who we are. We humans tend to be messy, scattered, and full of doubt at times. Knowing that Jesus was born in a manger for us, and that Jesus loves and forgives us, is even better news.

So let us confess together to God, knowing that the honest truth of our lives only makes this good news better. Let us pray:

PRAYER OF CONFESSION + WORDS OF FORGIVENESS

The prayer of confession will be centered around the already lit Advent wreath. One by one, the liturgist will extinguish the candles of hope, peace, joy, and love, only to relight them from the Christ candle at the end.

Holy God, too often we feel as if change is hopeless. The problems of this world feel too big, the path forward is unclear, and we are not confident that we can truly make a difference. We give up hope.

Liturgist snuffs out the candle of hope.

Together we pray:

Forgive us for extinguishing hope.

Holy God, too often we believe that peace is a thing of fairy tales. Our spirits are anxious. Our bodies are weary. Our world is fractured. Instead of praying for peace—both in ourselves and in our society—we assume that peace is no longer on the table. We give it up.

Liturgist snuffs out the candle of peace.

Together we pray:

Forgive us for extinguishing peace.

Holy God, too often we paint joy as naive—a luxury reserved for children and pets. We forget that you ate with friends, that you went to weddings, that you laughed and rested and hiked mountains. We forget that you knew joy, and that you want joy for us in this fractured world. Forgive us for turning away from your light.

Liturgist snuffs out the candle of joy.

Together we pray:

Forgive us for extinguishing joy.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION + WORDS OF FORGIVENESS (CONT.)

Holy God, too often we treat love like a vending machine. We put some coins in and assume that we'll get something back. However, in our wiser moments, we know that love is not meant for keeping score. Love is meant to overflow, to spill out to our neighbors, to transform our world. Forgive us for holding love so tightly.

Liturgist snuffs out the candle of love.

Together we pray:

Forgive us for extinguishing love.

Family of faith, sin separates us from things like hope, peace, and joy. Sin wiggles its way between us and love, both love of neighbor and love of self.

Fortunately for us, God had something else in mind. God sent God's only son to this world so that we could see another way. So friends, hear and believe the good news of the gospel: no matter how many times we turn our back on hope, or extinguish peace, or snuff out joy—no matter how many times we let love burn out—God continues to light our way.

Liturgist relights the candles of hope, peace, joy, and love from the Christ candle.

We are forgiven. We are seen. We are loved.

The good news of this day—the hope, the peace, the joy, and the love of this day—exists for you.

Thanks be to God! Amen.

EXTENDED PASSING OF THE PEACE/ A TIME FOR CELEBRATION

There is a movement in churches to extend the passing of the peace for a full five to seven minutes. This allows people to move about the sanctuary and to truly greet one another. To help this time feel festive, feel free to play some music in the background and provide some snacks like doughnut holes or coffee. At the conclusion of your extended passing of the peace, stop the music as a cue that the service is moving on.

Friends, at this time we are going to pause for a few minutes of fellowship and celebration. Stretch your legs. Introduce yourself to someone new. Say hello to someone you haven't seen in a while. Grab a doughnut. Refill your coffee. Pass the peace!

If you prefer to remain seated, you can take a moment to pray quietly, or you can greet your neighbors with a wave or smile from a distance. When you hear the music fade, we will gather back together.

The peace of Christ be with you.

And also with you!

HYMN

To help gather people back, join together in song. Select a hymn from our list of suggestions, or choose another Christmas hymn that your congregation loves.

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

God of manger straw and swaddle cloth,
God of silent nights and joyfully-chaotic mornings,
we long to know you.
The hustle and bustle of this time of year can be more than distracting,
so for a moment, we pray,
still our busy hearts.
Quiet our minds.
Help us to sink deeply into this day.
Help us to pause here,
to linger here
as we hear your good news spoken over us.
God, we long to know you,
so speak to us now.
With grateful hearts, we pray.
With grateful hearts, we listen.
Amen.

SCRIPTURE

You can read aloud John 1:1-18, Luke 2:15-21, and/or the poetic translation of John 1 included below. This poetic John 1 reading is designed for two voices that will read back and forth. To establish a rhythm and flow, we encourage you to practice this a few times. During the reading, you might invite worshipers to open their bibles to John 1 so that they can distinguish scripture text from poetic reflection, or you can provide the full text in your bulletin.

POETIC READING OF JOHN 1:1-5

Voice A:

Let us listen for God speaking to us through the ancient poetry of John 1, with contemporary poetic additions by Rev. Sarah Speed:

In the beginning was the Word,

Voice B:

way back, a long, long time ago,
before the stars,
before the day,
before the rivers were carved out of clay.

POETIC READING OF JOHN 1:1-5 (CONT.)

Voice A:

In the beginning,

Voice B:

way back in that beginning,

Voice A:

was the Word.

And the Word was with God,

And the Word was God.

He, Jesus, was in the beginning with God.

Voice B:

In other words, we cannot say

that love was born in a stable that day,

for love was born when the horizon was drawn.

It was born in the dark, long before dawn.

Love was born with the very first sea

and when God breathed life into you and me.

Long before Magi

or shepherds or dreams,

long before sheep or angels that sing,

love was here—

building a way,

then and now,

and on Christmas day.

Voice A:

For all things came into being through him,

and without him, not one thing came into being.

And what has come into being in him was life,

and the life was the light of all people.

Voice B:

And so Jesus shined.

Like a light in the dark,

or a star in the sky,

Jesus walked into this world

and opened our eyes,

shining a light on social divides

and loving the scars we try to hide.

He lit up this world like it's never seen,

the light of all people,

Emmanuel, King.

POETIC READING OF JOHN 1:1-5 (CONT.)

Voice A:

The light shines in the darkness,
And the darkness did not overcome it.

Voice B:

Hatred did not overcome it.
Fear did not overcome it.
Greed did not overcome it.

Voice A:

A light shines in the darkness.

Voice B:

Envy did not overcome it.
Doubt did not overcome it.
Scarcity did not overcome it.

Voice A:

A light shines in the darkness.

Voice B:

Death did not overcome it.
Sickness did not overcome it.
Grief did not overcome it.

Voice A:

For he was in the beginning with God,

Voice B:

way back, a long, long time ago,
before the stars,
before the day,
before the rivers were carved out of clay.

Voice A:

And what has come into being in him was life.

Voice B:

So we cannot begin with Magis and sheep,
for this story begins at the brink—

Voice A:

of creation and light,

Voice B:

of you and me,

Voice A:

of beloved and love,

POETIC READING OF JOHN 1:1-5 (CONT.)

Voice B:

of being set free.

Voice A:

For in the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God.

Voice B:

He was in the beginning with God,
and that light shines in the darkness.
It always has, and it always will.

Voice A:

That is where our story begins—
with love for creation,
from beginning to end. Amen.

RESPONSE TO THE WORD

A homily for both Christmas Eve and Christmas Day is an enormous task for anyone. If a homily is within your bandwidth, then you might focus on the ways that God dwells with us, and has from generation to generation, lifting up the good news of John 1. If you are seeking alternative options, here are some ideas to consider:

- *Celebrate Holy Communion. If you go this route, make sure you read scripture prior to Communion so that it is a response to the gospel.*
- *Interweave additional scripture readings, poetic readings, and songs into the service.*
- *Practice visio or lectio divina.⁴*
- *Invite a few members from your congregation to share a story about a time when they felt God dwelled with them. Each story should be five minutes or less. Note: We encourage you to review the stories before they are shared.*
- *Turn this service into a breakfast church service. Select a few pieces of liturgy and a few hymns from this service, and then segue into a shared meal. Allow the meal to be a reminder of Communion where all are welcome. Invite individuals to bring a breakfast dish or item to share.*

⁴ If you've purchased the full "From Generation to Generation..." bundle, our visual art collection contains a visio divina bible study guide. You can use this guide with any of the visual art in the bundle.

AFFIRMATION OF FAITH

Like Mary,

we believe in cherishing good news.

Like the angels,

we believe in singing God's praise.

Like the shepherds,

we believe that God's presence in our life is something worth talking about.

Like generations before,

we believe that God is with us.

Like the generations to come,

we believe that God is with us.

God is here. God is love.

We believe. Thanks be to God!

OFFERING

For generations and generations, it has been a Christian tradition to give gifts on Christmas. Children give homemade cards, parents and friends give presents wrapped in brightly-colored paper and bows. We do this in remembrance of the Magi who gave gifts when Jesus arrived. But we also do this because we love one another, and when you love someone, it feels good to give.

So just as we give gifts to one another on Christmas morning, let us also turn that same love toward God. Let us be generous with our time, talents, and treasures, because when we love someone, it feels good to give.

Collect monetary offerings.

CREATIVE PRAYER OF THE PEOPLE

In this prayer, worshipers will write an anonymous prayer and then pick someone else's prayer up before leaving worship. Begin to play music softly in the background as the instructions are given and throughout the time of prayer writing. Conclude the music with the collection of prayers. If you do not wish to go this route, add to the traditional prayer of the people below and eliminate the writing portion.

In prayer we bring our words to God. We bring our thoughts and our feelings, bundled together like flowers in a jar. Sometimes those prayers are silent. Sometimes those prayers are written and sometimes those prayers are spoken out loud. No matter how they come into being, God hears our words and holds them close.

Trusting that, let us turn to God in prayer.

Today we are going to engage in a creative prayer of the people. Most often, one of the members of this congregation/staff will pray a prayer in worship that encompasses prayer requests we have heard over the week. Today, however, instead of lifting up one voice, we long to lift up each voice.

CREATIVE PRAYER OF THE PEOPLE (CONT.)

To do that, please take out the clean piece of paper you received as you entered worship.⁵ Take a moment to center yourself in prayer, and when you are ready, write a prayer on your piece of paper. It could be a word, a phrase, or a sentence. It could be a prayer of joy, a prayer of gratitude, or a prayer of concern. Please refrain from including specific names, for the sake of anonymity. After a time of music and writing our prayers, ushers will walk the aisles with baskets in their hands.⁶ Please place your anonymous prayer in one of the baskets.

At the end of the service, before you leave, you will be invited to pick up a prayer slip left by another member of the congregation. Pray for that person's prayer throughout the week, knowing and trusting that someone else in this community is also praying for you. Consider it a Christmas gift.

Friends, may we draw closer to God. May we offer up our prayers now. Let us pray...

Provide music and ample time to write and collect the prayers.

CLOSING PRAYER

After all the prayers have been written and collected, pray the following:

Holy God of candlelight and open doors,
God of tables and feasts,
God of holly and of ivy,
we give you our prayers.
Like pennies shaken loose from our pockets,
we turn over every corner of our hearts
to give you our truth through
prayers of gratitude,
prayers of fear,
prayers of grief.
Collect them all and hold us close
on this Christmas morning,
for today,
especially today,
we long to feel you near.
With gratitude and joyful hearts we pray.
Amen.

⁵ Alternatively: "You will find a piece of paper in your bulletin/pew/under your seat."

⁶ Alternatively: "When you are ready, you may come forward and place your prayers in one of the baskets at the front of the sanctuary."

HYMN

Select a hymn from our list of suggestions, or choose another Christmas hymn that your congregation loves. At the start of this hymn, have one of your pastors or the ushers collect the baskets full of the written prayers and walk them to the sanctuary exits. During the hymn and closing benediction, it may be wise to quickly flip through the prayers in the baskets in case any of them need to be reserved for pastors (and not passed back out to a member in the congregation). For example, you may not want a six-year-old to pick up a prayer about an affair or suicidal ideation. If any need to be removed and given to the pastor, make sure you replace them with another prayer card provided by staff so that the same number of prayers remains.

BENEDICTION

For the closing benediction, invite your congregation to leave their seats and form one large circle, either in the front of the sanctuary or around the pews/chairs. You will have to determine how and where you can stand, based on the numbers you have present that morning. If you have too many people to leave the pews, then this exercise can work while worshipers are seated, as they can hold hands with those next to them and pass a squeeze down the line. Please keep any individuals with limited mobility in mind.

Throughout the season of Advent, we have focused on the idea that God's love has moved and grown from generation to generation, proving to be faithful to us in every season. To embody this good news, we will close by holding hands with one another and passing a squeeze from person to person as a physical reminder that God's goodness has existed from generation to generation, which includes us.

In a moment, I am going to invite you, as you are able, to stand up, to leave your seat, and to form a large circle in the front of the sanctuary. It may feel chaotic for a moment. That's okay. God is pretty familiar with chaos and really won't mind. Once we are all standing in a large circle, one by one, we will go around the circle and hold hands with the person next to us. This will provide both a visual and physical reminder of the way God's love, grace, and good news not only passes from moment to moment, but from generation to generation, encompassing all of us. If you prefer to remain seated, consider yourself held and encompassed by the love within this larger circle.

Take a moment now to move into a large circle, clasping hands with your neighbor.

As the pastor/worship leader, join the circle. Once everyone is in place with hands clasped, lift up the hand you are holding with your right hand and signify to the congregation that you will start the squeeze and pass it to the right around the circle. As the squeeze passes through the circle, offer these closing words:

Friends, for generations, God has been drawing near to us. Over and over, year after year, Christmas has filled people with hope and with joy. So may we lean into that joy with the physical reminder of our connection—passed from person to person.

Worshipers remain in a circle with hands clasped.

BENEDICTION (CONT.)

Friends, before you leave, I remind you to grab a prayer from one of the baskets by the door. Allow this anonymous exchange of prayers to feel like an extension of this circle, and to feel like an extension of God's presence in your life. Cherish this prayer this week and know that someone else is praying for you.

Now, receive this benediction:

From generation to generation,

God keeps drawing near.

From generation to generation,

a light has shone in the darkness.

From generation to generation,

God's love has moved through the world like our connection moved through this room.

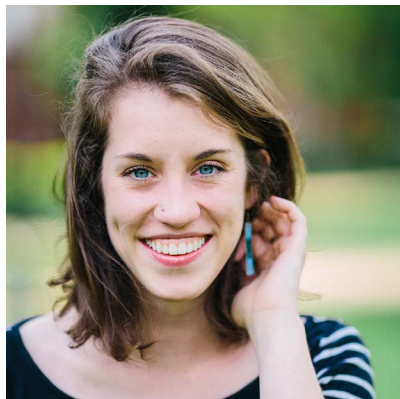
So may we celebrate that.

May we rest in the joy of this day,

and may we allow it to change us.

Merry Christmas!

Go in peace. God is with you every step of the way.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed, *Founding Creative Partner of A Sanctified Art*

Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed (*she/her*) is the new Associate Pastor for Young Adults and Membership at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City. She graduated from Virginia Commonwealth University with a degree in Social Work, and holds a Master of Divinity degree from Columbia Theological Seminary. Sarah loves to combine her love of all things creative with her passion for God. She believes that the Church has a responsibility to open every door

to God, so that those of us who are visual, kinesthetic, or relational learners all have equal opportunity to engage God to the fullest of our abilities. Sarah feels called to live her life welcoming people into the church by using her energy and passion for beautifully scripted words, raw and relevant liturgy, and hands-on worship experiences to engage our longing for God and the need for justice in this messy world. Writing is her most beloved spiritual practice. You can find her daily poems on Instagram and Facebook: @writingthegood | writingthegood.com

A Sanctified Art LLC is a collective of artists in ministry who create resources for worshiping communities. The Sanctified Art team works collaboratively to bring scripture and theological themes to life through film, visual art, curriculum, coloring pages, liturgy, graphic designs, and more. Their mission is to empower churches with resources to inspire creativity in worship and beyond. Driven by the connective and prophetic power of art, they believe that art helps us connect our hearts with our hands, our faith with our lives, and our mess with our God. Learn more about their work at sanctifiedart.org.

