**Worship Brainstorming Summary**

“The Gift of Being Present”

An Advent/Christmas series

Thurs., November 9, 2023

Brainstorming for Worship

November 26, 2023-December 31, 2023

(4 weeks of Advent plus Blue Christmas, Christmas Eve, & New Year’s Eve/Christmas 1)

**Members present:** Larry Jorgenson, Jim Post, Dave Booth, Ed Baranowski, Mark Erbes, Annette Erbes, Betty Kinney, Karen Post, Sue Baranowski, Vicki Zuker, Ron Zuker, Pastor Mary, Karen Booth; Jean Kelly via email

**2024 Theme:**  Following the Jesus Way (inspired by *The Jesus Way* by Phil Wickham)

**Key verse:** John 13: 34 – A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.

**Related song:** *I Have Decided to Follow Jesus*

**Major spoken/unspoken needs:**

* Carrying the weight of unforgiveness
* Apathy
* Loneliness. Relationships or lack thereof.
* Lack of manners
* Self-medication – to escape problems, extend life; can become an idol
* Aging. Caregiving.
* The church: What it is vs. what it should be. Its future. Non-believers’ assumptions.
* Technology – the pace of change, its role in our lives, ethics
* Fear, anxiety, anger, violence

**Social justice issue for November 2023:** Hunger & Food Insecurity

**Social justice issue for December 2023:** Inequality of Global Health Care (World AIDS Day, preventable diseases - malaria, polio, etc.)

**Synopsis:** Advent can be filled with worry about finding the perfect Christmas gifts. Deep down we want people in our lives to know they are special and that we love them. But sometimes we overlook the greatest gift of all - our very presence. Our spiritual ancestors were also worried – often about survival in the midst of political occupation. And the response of the scriptures is “the Holy Living One is with you.” Like a shepherd who never leaves the flock, we are held close. This season, **we are invited to be the gift** **of presence for our loved ones, for our communities, for those who need it most.**

**2024 theme connection:** It is easy to feel alone in our struggles. Only Jesus, who was and is fully present with everyone he encounters, can help us be the gift of presence for others.

**Key verse:** Isaiah 40:11, The Inclusive Bible

“Like a shepherd you feed your flock, gathering the lambs and holding them close,

and leading mother ewes with gentleness.”

**Resources:**

* *The Gift of Being Present* by Marcia McFee. Trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AMkMzmgTHcA>
* [The Precious Present](https://www.penguinrandomhouse.ca/books/87966/the-precious-present-by-spencer-johnson/9780385468053/excerpt) by Spencer Johnson
* [Just Show Up: How Small Acts of Faithfulness Change Everything (A Guide for Exhausted Christians](https://www.amazon.com/Just-Show-Faithfulness-Everything-Christians/dp/0802428584) by Drew Dyck. Its message fits nicely with both our Advent series and our 2024 worship focus.

Bestselling self-help book titles tell you that you’re brilliant, awesome, powerful—usually with an expletive thrown in, just to pound home the point. Do these affirmations feel accurate? Instead of blasting through projects and conquering the world, most of us feel like we’re crawling uphill.

But Christians are still called to live a life that glorifies God and blesses others. How do we do that when we’re stretched to capacity? Just Show Up answers that question with a liberating message: God doesn’t expect you to do everything. And He certainly doesn’t expect you to do it all overnight. Simply showing up is often the most important thing.

**Questions and notes for reflection:**

* What’s the best gift you’ve been given?
  + Jean: One of the best gifts I’ve received is a crocheted granny square afghan given to me by my Grandmother.  Along with the fact that she made it, it came with a note expressing her appreciation for all that I had been doing for her during a time of challenging health concerns for her and my Grandpa.  Her son, my Dad, who passed away before his parents, had modeled this behavior for my siblings and me.  He had shown us how to show up even when it is difficult which is many times the case.  I suppose this was a gift from him.
  + Larry: Leaf blower
  + Sue: Gifts from two aunts. Her poorer aunt knitted and crocheted mittens, using up yarn she had. Her wealthier aunt opened up her home to family. Both had kind, loving spirits.
  + Betty: Bicycle
  + Dave: New underwear – as the last of four boys, it was nice to get something new, not hand-me-downs. Pastor Mary concurred; she was the youngest too.
  + Mark: An afghan made by a woman from his last congregation. It was such a surprise because they were polar opposites theologically. It took her three years to make it and was a huge surprise.
* Annette wondered about the best gifts you have ever given and why?
  + As one whose love-language is not gifts, Pastor Mary has a hard time finding something for her gift-loving husband, Ivan. She scored big with a tea box.
  + Sue said it is hard to say because she has put so much time and effort into making some gifts, which were received with mixed results.
* When has someone’s presence brought you hope, peace, joy, comfort, love, assurance)?

**Visuals:**

* Advent wreath - add a candle each week, decorate with bows?
* Wrapped gifts, bows - present/presence. Supplement actual wrapped boxes with gift shapes on the north and east walls made from paper, plastic tablecloths, or corrugated cardboard.
  + Lit up presents
* Gift box with bow for Children’s Time. Manger filled with bows.
* [Wreaths made from bows](https://www.pinterest.com/pin/4011087159566791/) or giant bows in lieu of wreaths ([version 1 with posterboard](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZwktKqT51j4&t=42s) and [version 2 with duct tape](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a5YQfWWl2Jw))
* [Inspirational images on Unsplash](https://unsplash.com/photos/a-brown-box-with-a-green-ribbon-w9pkuuRtTiU) – note the earthy color palette.
* *Upcycling delivery boxes into gifts:* Open the box so it lays flat with the clean “inside” up. Stencil simple Christmas designs on the clean side using [this video](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CSZlLsib5Kw&t=347s) as inspiration. Reassemble the box with the design on the outside, using clear packing tape to secure. Top with a color coordinated bow.

**Hands-on items:**

* Small gift boxes – made from Christmas cards or ordered from Oriental Trading
* Christmas Eve postcard
* Something shiny (Dec. 31)

**Music:**

* *What Can I Give Him* (in WDS materials). The lyrics are from verse 4 of #221 “In the Bleak Midwinter.” They are set to a new tune.
* **Doxology** sung to *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel* during Advent and *The First Noel* on Christmas and after
* Bells and choir will offer ministry of music each week

**Media possibilities:**

* [“Advent Worship Collection 2”](https://skitguys.com/videos/advent-worship-collection-2) by The Skit Guys. Length: 1:30-2:00 each. Cost: $49.99 for four videos. As we prepare our hearts and souls for the arrival of the Christ child, we focus on the themes of Advent: hope, love, joy, peace, and Christ. These thought-provoking and beautiful videos will fit into your Advent services as sermon introductions or to provide a time of reflection during worship. **Comments:** Mark used this in a recent series as the Call to Worship. Each video points to what we need to do next. Needs narration as the text is quite small. Worth considering.

**Activity:** Advent wreath and candle lighting: Volunteers are needed.

**Children’s Time:**

* Marcia McFee and colleagues have written scripts for Advent and Christmas Eve worship presented by someone who is dressed as a present: …the script invites the children to get a colored bow each week out of the manger. Attached to the bow are big gift tags with the word for the week used in several different sentences. Children can try to use these sentences throughout the week to be the gift of the presence of hope (blue), peace (green), joy (gold), love (red), and light (silver or white…you may need more of these for more children on Christmas Eve).
* Costume: Decorate a large box as a wearable Christmas and top it off with a bow. Alternate idea: Wear a gift bag. It doesn’t fit quite as well with this cheer:

*If you’re boxed in, flip your lid!*

*Let the Hope out that you’re holding in!*

*For it’s a gift and you are too.*

*So flip your lid and share the gift that’s YOU!*

* [Hallmark 3” gift bows](If%20you’re%20boxed%20in,%20flip%20your%20lid!%20%20Let%20the%20Hope%20out%20that%20you’re%20holding%20in!%20%20For%20it’s%20a%20gift%20and%20you%20are%20too.%20%20So%20flip%20your%20lid%20and%20share%20the%20gift%20that’s%20YOU!) (75 in red, gold, green, silver, blue) $9.99 on Amazon
* Related hand-out: Coloring page with things to say about hope, peace, joy, and love.

**Ideas:**

* Post daily social media posts - uses weekly focus (Hope, Peace, Joy, Love, Presence)

**Christmas/Christmas Eve offering:** Family Promise of the Lakeshore & Mujila Falls/Dr. Temba Nkomozepi

**General discussion points:**

* Scripture:
  + Scripture is not meant to be read as a geo-political document; it is a story of faith. Israel refers to a people/nation/culture, not the country that was created May 14, 1948. We have to keep that in mind as current events in Israel, Gaza, and the surrounding countries unfold.
  + This is a lectionary-based series. It is likely that we will only use the Scripture that is bolded, not the entire readings as shown in this document.
  + Note that our spiritual ancestors’ worries were primarily focused on things that were out of their control. Those things make us worry too.
* We’ll use the traditional focus of hope, peace, joy, and love for the Advent candle lighting. Let Pastor Mary know if you would like to be part of the readings and lightings.
* We still stand in need of a savior – as much now as ever. People need hope, joy, peace, love, and places of safety.
* The Surgeon General notes that loneliness is a health epidemic. Pastors see the need for belonging most clearly in older adults and college students.
* God showed up in the incarnation. He called us to reflect his presence in the world by showing up. Pastors refer to just showing up as the ministry of presence.
* Pastor Mary was with the Hoadleys when Greg died last night. Renee said she could not have gotten through Greg’s Alzheimer’s diagnosis on top of their children’s health issues without their church community.

**When has someone’s presence brought you hope, joy, peace, or love?** **Or when has someone told you that you presence brought them?**

* Pastor Mary: Whenever some sits and actively listens to me.
* Jean: Times of grieving when each of my parents passed away.  At my retirement gathering, as after 40 years I had connected with many co-workers and vendor reps.  I had been a mentor for several and felt gratitude for their well wishes and memories of how little acts and my chocolate basket had impacted their lives.  Hank Meijer also showed up to wish me well - his Dad had also been a role model of showing up and showing appreciation and support for others.
* Larry: Being married to Bonnie for the past 62 years.
* Jim Post: When Karen Booth sat with him in the waiting while his Karen was in surgery.
* Ed: The presence of many people in the surgery waiting room while their granddaughter was having open heart surgery.
* Vicki: So many people prayed over me in my car in the parking lot before my cancer surgery and continued to support me through the journey.
* Larry: Normally Larry was asked to be a quiet presence in ICU, but one day he was asked to talk to a 40-something guy about dee hunting. They spent over an hour together. Two days later he died. He felt privileged to have that conversation.

-------------------------------------------------------

**November 26, 2023:** “Being Present with Hope” - 1st Sunday of Advent

**Scripture:** Psalm 80: 1-7, 17-19 (NRSV updated edition)

**1 Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock!**

**You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth 2 before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh. Stir up your might, and come to save us!**

**3 Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.**

4 O Lord God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?

5 You have fed them with the bread of tears, and given them tears to drink in full

measure.

6 You make us the scorn of our neighbors; our enemies laugh among themselves.

7 Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

17 But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand, the one whom you made

strong for yourself.

18 Then we will never turn back from you; give us life, and we will call on your name.

19 Restore us, O LORD God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

**Scripture:** I Corinthians 1: 3-9 (NRSV)

3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

**4 I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, 5 for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind- 6 just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you-- 7 so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.** 8 He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of ourLord Jesus Christ.9 God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ ourLord.

**Scripture:** Mark 13: 24-37 (NRSV)

24 "But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, 25 and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. 26 Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. 27 Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

28 "From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. 29 So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. 30 Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. 31 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

32 "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. 33 Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. 34 It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. 35 Therefore, keep awake--for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, 36 or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. **37 And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake."**

**Synopsis:** Our spiritual ancestors cried out in the midst of their political occupations: “Save us!” The idea of a Messiah went hand-in-hand with the need for God to help them in their distress. The Roman occupation of Jesus’ time and of the early Christian community is expressed with a sense of waiting, watching, and anticipation of restoration to freedom. All this points to the presence of hope, essential to survival in difficult times. Let us be present with hope to those who need it most.

**Felt need:** To cling to hope ourselves as a gift of God and offer it to others

**Visuals:** Advent wreath - candle of HOPE. Alarm clocks.

**Hands-on item:**

**Activity:** Ask several people to set the alarms on their watches or phones to go off during the service to illustrate Mark 13:37’s admonition to “Keep awake!”

**Media possibilities:**

**Music:** *What Gift Can We Bring* (UMH 87), *I*[*t Came Upon the Midnight Clear*](https://hymnary.org/hymn/GG2013/123) (UMH 218)

**Children’s Time:** *The Gift of Hope.* Bow color: **Blue**.

**Discussion points:** 1) The readings are a follow-up to the traditional end of the Christian year. There is a focus on starting over. Jesus will show up, but no one knows when so we are admonished to “stay awake.” Why did Jesus emphasize that? People:

* Don’t pay attention all the time. Examples: Texting while walking or driving. Being on phones in the presence of others. Not aware of our surrounding.
* Follow the wrong voices and are distracted by so many things.
* Are caught up in our own lives.

2) We don’t seem to have the same sense of urgency or anticipation as people did in bible times. We have a hard time waiting. Hope is essential. Related song: [“Jesus Is Coming Back”](https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/jordanfeliz/jesusiscomingback.html) by Jordan Feliz. 3) Bill Barton’s family asked that their son’s memorial service offer hope for the grieving. 4) Who needs hope? Those who are grieving, impatient, being laid off from work (Shape employees), or live in a war zone (Gaza/Middle East, Ukraine). 5) Being present means focusing on relationships. Pastor Mary is grateful for quality time spent with her high school friends.

----------------------------------------------------

**December 3, 2023:** “Being Present with Peace” – 2nd Sunday of Advent

**Scripture:** Isaiah 40: 1-11 (NRSV updated edition)

**1 Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.**

2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

3 A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

4 Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.

5 Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

6 A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All people are grass, their

constancy is like the flower of the field.

7 The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the LORD blows upon it; surely the people are grass.

8 The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.

9 Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!"

10 See, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with

him, and his recompense before him.

11 He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

**Scripture:** II Peter 3: 8-15a (NRSVUE)

8 But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. 9 The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. 10 But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.

11 Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, 12 waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire? **13 But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth,** **where righteousness is at home.**

**14 Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace,** without spot or blemish;15a and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation. So also our beloved brother Paulwrote to you according to the wisdom given him.

**Scripture:** Mark 1: 1-8 (NRSVUE)

1 The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

**2 As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; 3 the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'"**

so 4 John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. 6 Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7 He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. 8 I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

**Synopsis:** Preparing the way for new beginnings, fresh starts, and a clear path, is a classic theme in the faith narrative and in our own lives. Life can contain many chapters. The Good News is that the Holy One is continually making a way for do-overs. In this we can find peace, even when life doesn’t feel so peaceful. This week we focus on what it means to be a gift of non-anxious presence for those who need it most.

**Felt need:** To know the peace of God through the promise of comfort, even as we have seasons of waiting, and to offer a peaceful presence to others

**Visuals:** Advent wreath - candle of PEACE

**Hands-on item:**

**Activity:** Holy Communion (use WDS liturgy)

**Media possibilities:**

**Music:** *O Day of Peace that Dimly Shines* (UMH 729) - **could be a choir anthem**, [*I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day*](https://hymnary.org/text/i_heard_the_bells_on_christmas_day) *-* **could be a choir anthem.**  Amy Grant’s [“I Need a Silent Night”](https://lyrics.lyricfind.com/lyrics/amy-grant-i-need-a-silent-night) from 2008:

I've made the same mistake before

Too many malls, too many stores

December traffic, Christmas rush

It breaks me till I push and shove

Children are crying while mothers are trying

To photograph Santa and sleigh

The shopping and buying and standing forever in line

What can I say?

I need a silent night, a holy night

To hear an angel voice through the chaos and the noise

I need a midnight clear, a little peace right here

To end this crazy day with a silent night

**Children’s Time:** 1) *The Gift of Peace.* Bow color: **Green**.2) Explain “passing the peace.” How can we pass the peace to others in our daily lives?

**Discussion points:** 1) Peace is found in knowing that God is with us. 2) How do we find peace amidst the chaos and clutter present in our homes where it looks like “Christmas threw up”? 3) Peace is the presence of God, not the absence of trouble. 4) How can we be an unanxious presence? Who has been that presence for us?

* Annette: The men in my family
* Pastor Mary: Ivan and Luka

5) Holiday gatherings with relatives promote anxiety because:

* Some don’t get along. *Antidote:* Call for a ceasefire.
* Expectations are (unrealistically) high. *Antidote:* Talk about expectations aloud. Focus on other less stressful holidays, like Thanksgiving.
* Some family members may be missing. *Antidote:* Share good memories. Participate in a Blue Christmas service.
* The season isn’t happy or peaceful, but rushed. *Antidote:* Do less. Scale back. Ask for help.

6) What are your most peaceful holiday memories?

* Annette: Driving home after the Christmas Eve service and seeing luminaries in the snow.
* Karen Post: Making the decision to stay home for their first Christmas in Muskegon rather than trying to attend their out-of-state family celebrations.
* Booths: Volunteering Dave to be on call during his medical residency so they could celebrate at home.
* Betty: She took the kids to a Christmas Eve service in Spring Lake. Gary drove in from his flight to Chicago and joined them half way through the service.
* Dave: Going out on the deck at his brother’s house for some quiet time – one solution to being an introvert is a family of extroverts.
* Larry: Sitting on the deck after family left, trying to regain his equilibrium.

---------------------------------------------------

**December 10, 2022:** “Being Present with Joy” - 3rd Sunday of Advent

**Scripture:** Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11 (NRSVUE)

Jesus repeats the highlighted verses in Luke 4.

**1 The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; 2 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; 3 to provide for those who mourn in Zion-- to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.** They willbe called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory.

4 They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.

8 For I the Lord love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them

their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.

9 Their descendants shall be known among the nations, and their offspring among the

peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed.

10 I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has

clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of

righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

11 For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to

spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

**Scripture:** Psalm 126 ( NRSVUE)

**1 When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream.**

**2 Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then it was said among the nations, "The Lord has done great things for them."**

**3 The Lord has done great things for us, and we rejoiced.**

4 Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like the watercourses in the Negeb. 5 May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy. 6 Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.

**Scripture:** Luke 1: 46b-55

**46b "My soul magnifies the Lord, 47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,**

**48 for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;**

**49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.**

50 His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

51 He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of

their hearts.

52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;

53 he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

54 He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,

55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his

descendants forever."

**Synopsis:** The words of the prophet Isaiah offer a prophetic vision that Jesus will also claim in his ministry. Likewise, we are called to claim the gift of being fully present with all people – those who mourn, those who grieve, those who have suffered indignity and oppression. Mary’s Song (the Magnificat) is prophetic as well. She claims the overturning of injustice even before it has come to pass. Joy is not the equivalent of happiness, but rather the deep conviction that we are called to be present in the work of bringing about “great things” – a better world for those who need it most.

**Felt need:** To remember that joy is different than happiness and is connected to seeking justice for all people

**Visuals:** Advent wreath - candle of JOY

**Hands-on item:**

**Activity:**

**Media possibilities:**

**Music:** [*Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee*](https://hymnary.org/text/joyful_joyful_we_adore_thee) (UMH 89), [*Hark, the Herald Angels Sing*](https://hymnary.org/text/hark_the_herald_angels_sing_glory_to) (UMH 240), [*Mary Did You Know?*](https://jubilatemusic.com/products/mary-did-you-know) *-* **could be a choir anthem**, *For Everyone Born* (WS 3149)

**Children’s Time:** *The Gift of Joy.* Bow color: Gold.

**Discussion points:**

* Mary’s song:
  + Connects joy with seeking justice for all, something we might not do on our own or in our time. Contemporary discussions of justice make it feel like there can never be enough justice to go around – a joyless attitude of scarcity. It can be scary to even bring up the topic as we feel like we may fall into someone’s trap.
  + Anticipates
* Who needs joy? Justice?
* Joy is a spiritual thing, also defined as warmth of the Spirit. It is an understanding that we know we are loved. We need to know that. (Ron)
* Ways we experience joy: Feeling connected to people, even if we don’t know them -
  + Larry: Music. *Main Cabin Masters*
  + Dave: Feel good FaceBook reels like *America’s Got Talent Gold Buzzer*
  + *The Voice*
  + *The Great British Bake-Off*
  + *Ted Lasso*
  + Mark: The U.S. Air Force band performing [“One Voice”](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q41ctPLDHvU) at the National Cathedral
* We don’t seem to talk about joy much other than at Christmas and Easter. Blue Christmas and Christmas Eve are the most joy-filled services for many. They are all about presence even amid difficulties. We may be sad about certain things, but remembering on Blue Christmas is cathartic. *Loosely related story:* In Star Trek, Spock wanted McCoy to “remember” his soul.
* We find joy when family gathers and again when they leave.

-----------------------------------------------

**December 11, 2023:** “Being Present with Comfort” – Blue Christmas

**Scripture:** John 1: 1-4, 14 (NRSVUE)

1In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2He was in the beginning with God. 3All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being 4in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. 5The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

14And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.

**Synopsis:** The presence of loved ones offers us comfort, and the pain is palpable as we grieve their absence whether through death, strained relationships, changes in life circumstances, and other situations.

**Felt need:** To acknowledge the reality of death, loss, and grief and the need for comfort through the promise of God with us and the presence of others who care

**Visuals:** Advent wreath - candle of COMFORT

**Hands-on item:** Light (candle, votive, Christmas bulb).

**Activity:** Lighting candles (candle ladder). Prayer. Anointing.

**Media possibilities:**

**Music:** *Worn, Held, May You Find a Light*

**Social media:** Create Facebook event

**Discussion points:** 1) See page 11 for some discussion of Blue Christmas. 2) Let Pastor Mary know if you wish to volunteer as a reader, “pray-er,” or control booth helper for this service. 3) In addition to some of the hands-on items listed above, we have handed out angel cut-outs, prayers, and clothespin candles.

-----------------------------------------------------

**December 17, 2023:** “Being Present with Love” – 4th Sunday of Advent

**Scripture:** II Samuel 7: 1-11, 16 (NRSVUE)

1 Now when the king was settled in his house, and the LORD had given him rest from all his enemies around him, 2 the king said to the prophet Nathan, "See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent."

3 Nathan said to the king, "Go, do all that you have in mind; for the LORD is with you."

4 But that same night the word of the LORD came to Nathan:

5 Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the LORD: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? 6 I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. 7 Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, "Why have you not built me a house of cedar?"

**8 Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David:**

**Thus says the LORD of hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel; 9 and I have been with you wherever you went,** and have cut off all your enemies frombefore you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of theearth.10 And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they maylive in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more,as formerly,11 from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you restfrom all your enemies. Moreover the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you ahouse.

16 Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever.

**Scripture:** Psalm 89: 1-4, 19-26 (NRSVUE)

**1 I will sing of your steadfast love, O Lord, forever;**

**with my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations.**

**2 I declare that your steadfast love is established forever;**

**your faithfulness is as firm as the heavens.**

**3 You said, "I have made a covenant with my chosen one,**

**I have sworn to my servant David:**

**4 'I will establish your descendants forever,**

**and build your throne for all generations.'"**

*Selah*

19 Then you spoke in a vision to your faithful one, and said: "I have set the crown on one who is mighty, I have exalted one chosen from the people.

20 I have found my servant David; with my holy oil I have anointed him;

21 my hand shall always remain with him; my arm also shall strengthen him.

22 The enemy shall not outwit him, the wicked shall not humble him.

23 I will crush his foes before him and strike down those who hate him.

24 My faithfulness and steadfast love shall be with him;

and in my name his horn shall be exalted.

25 I will set his hand on the sea and his right hand on the rivers.

26 He shall cry to me, 'You are my Father, my God, and the Rock of my salvation!'

**Scripture:** Luke 1: 26-38 (NRSVUE)

**26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, 27 to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." 29 But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. 30 The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31 And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.** 32 He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will giveto him the throne of his ancestor David.33 He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

34 Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?"

35 The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. 36 And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. 37 For nothing will be impossible with God." 38 Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

**Synopsis:** The faith narrative is careful to show us a lineage from King David to Jesus. It is no ordinary lineage, it is one that began in the shepherding of sheep, of leading and delivering the people in search of a home. Mary’s womb becomes part of that lineage of love, offering the world the gift of God’s presence “in the flesh.” As we enter the story of the birth of Jesus, who is Love Among Us, we are invited to be present in love with those that need it most.

**Felt need:** To claim our place in God’s lineage of loving God and others

**Visuals:** Advent wreath - candle of LOVE

**Hands-on item:**

**Activity:**

**Media possibilities:**

**Music:** [*Love Divine, All Love’s Excelling*](https://hymnary.org/text/love_divine_all_love_excelling_joy_of_he) (UMH 384), [*Love Came Down at Christmas*](https://hymnary.org/text/love_came_down_at_christmas)(UMH 242)

**Children’s Time:** *The Gift of Love.* Bow color: **Red.**

**Discussion points:**

* Jesus is God’s love incarnate (in the flesh). We are called to reflect/be God’s love.
* Today’s readings show the connection from King David to Jesus and then to our place in the faith story.
* What does loving presence look like? It is often just sitting with someone in silence or sitting and truly listening.
* Who needs God’s love the most? How can we remember them year-round?
  + The lonely, especially those living in nursing homes or assisted living.
  + The incarcerated and their families. *On a related note:* We are collecting 20 Angel Tree gifts through Reach the Forgotten Ministry. Participants are an important go-between for the parent and child. Parent write a message to the child, which is attached to the gift. Larry was delivering one gift when the woman who answered the door asked him to speak to her husband, who was on the phone at the time. It was so touching.
  + Newly released prisoners, trying to reenter society.
  + People living away from family.
* From Jean: Have more thoughts and questions about what kind of boundaries are appropriate when extending support for others.  For example, how does one best support the hungry and the homeless?  I have to admit that I do not feel that I could ever offer a room in my home to a homeless person including most family with exception of siblings.  I do not feel good about this attitude.  So what can I do of significant support and compassion? Currently I donate time and resources to organizations that support, but, nothing that provides direct care.

--------------------------------------------

**December 24, 2023:** “Being Present with Light” – Christmas Eve

**Services at 10:00 a.m. & 5:00 p.m., Outside at 10:00 p.m.**

**Scripture:** Isaiah 9: 2-7 (NRSV)

**2 The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness on them light has shined.**

3 You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as

with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder.

4 For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their

oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian.

5 For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire.

6 For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

7 His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

**Scripture:** Luke 2: 1-20 (NRSV)

1 In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2 This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3 All went to their own towns to be registered. 4 Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. 5 He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. 6 While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 7 And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

**8 In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see--I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11 to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. 12 This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger."** 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising Godand saying,

14 "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." 16 So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. 17 When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. 19 But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. 20 The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

**Synopsis:** It is the time we celebrate the opening of the most precious gift of presence we know – the birth of the Christ Child, the Light of the World. As we light our candles, we open our hearts to becoming part of the gift of light in the world. Like the choice the shepherds face, will we live in the shadows of fears, or will we dare to run to the manger to know and believe the Good News of new possibilities for all who need it most?

**Felt need:** To celebrate the Incarnation - the presence of Emmanuel, God with us – and offering ourselves as Jesus’ disciples to be God’s presence and light in the world

**Visuals:** Advent wreath - Christ candle

**Hands-on item:** Christmas Eve postcard – *You are a gift. Thank you for being “present” with us. Go and be present so others make know the love of Jesus, our Emmanuel.*

**Activity:** Pick up pageant for kids at 10:00 a.m., lighting candles

**Media possibilities:**

* ["The Light (Christmas Eve).”](https://www.playbackmedia.com/mini-movies/57018/the-light-christmas-eve) Length: 1:34. Cost: Free. Over 2000 years ago a light was given to us to be shared with the world. Using scripture from John 8:12 and Isaiah 9:2, this mini-movie is designed specifically for Christmas Eve services. **Comments:** Mixed reviews.
* [“The Gift of Christmas.”](https://www.playbackmedia.com/mini-movies/48528/the-gift-of-christmas) Length: 2:01. Cost: Free. What does it say about the character of God that He would give His only son for us? So often, we spend Christmas focused on what it is like to receive this gift, but in The Gift of Christmas, we shift our perspective to instead imagine what it was like for God to give us the gift of Jesus. **Comments:** Mixed reviews.

**Music:** *Silent Night* (UMH 239), [*Go, Tell It on the Mountain*](https://hymnary.org/text/while_shepherds_kept_their_watching) (UMH 251), *It Came upon the Midnight Clear* (UMH 218), [*Joy to the World*](https://hymnary.org/text/joy_to_the_world_the_lord_is_come) (UMH 246), [*What Child Is This?*](https://hymnary.org/text/what_child_is_this_who_laid_to_rest) (UMH 219), *Emmanuel (Hallowed Manger Ground)*

**Children’s Time:** *The Gift of Light.* Bow color: **Silver.**

**Social media:** Create Facebook event

**Discussion points:**

* We’ll use the same scripture for both indoor services. The format may be somewhat different. Non-negotiables: Lighting candles. Singing “Silent Night.”
* We are not planning on communion at this point. Mark remembered one icy Christmas Eve where he had to send Meghan out to a Speedway to get a loaf of white bread because he had forgotten about prepping for Communion.

-----------------------------------------------------

**December 31, 2023:** “Being Present with Assurance” – Christmas 1

**One service at 10:00 a.m.**

**Scripture:** Isaiah 61: 10 - 62: 3 (NRSVUE)

10 I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God;

for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,

he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,

as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,

and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

11 For as the earth brings forth its shoots,

and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,

so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise

to spring up before all the nations.

62 For Zion's sake I will not keep silent,

and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest,

until her vindication shines out like the dawn,

and her salvation like a burning torch.

**2 The nations shall see your vindication,**

**and all the kings your glory; and you shall be**

**called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will give.**

**3 You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord,**

**and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.**

**Scripture:** Galatians 4:4-7 (NRSVUE)

**4 But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, 5 in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. 6 And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!"** 7 So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

**Scripture:** Luke 2: 22-40 (NRSVUE)

22 When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord 23 (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord"), 24 and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons." **25 Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous** **and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him.** **26 It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he** **had seen the Lord's Messiah.** **27 Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in** **the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law,** **28 Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,**

**29 "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word;** **30 for my eyes have seen your salvation,** **31 which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,** **32 a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."**

33 And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. 34 Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed 35 so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed--and a sword will pierce your own soul too."

36 There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, 37 then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. 38 At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

39 When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. 40 The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

**Synopsis:** The overwhelming message of the Christmas story is the assurance that we, too, are children of the Holy One. In this, our very presence is a gift if we will only allow the Spirit to move in and through us. Every day of our ordinary lives, we can show up – be present – and proclaim the assurance of hope, peace, joy, and love to those who need it most.

**Felt need:** To claim our role as witnesses who “show up” as a part of incarnational ministry - reflecting the presence of Christ in the world

**Visuals:** Christ candle

**Hands-on item:** 1) 2024 theme and key Scripture verses from John 13. 2) Something reflective: mirror, vest, stars, tinsel.

**Activity:**

**Media possibilities:**

**Music:** [*Blessed Assurance*](https://hymnary.org/text/blessed_assurance_jesus_is_mine) (UMH 369), *We Three Kings* (UMH 254)

**Children’s Time:** The three kings showed up for Jesus.

**Discussion points:** Showing up is part of an incarnational ministry.