



Worship Resource Pack

Christmas is one of the richest opportunities we have to connect with people who might not usually come to church and who may be open to hearing something of the good news through the story we tell at Christmas.

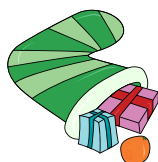
This worship resource pack is designed to support you as you plan services that tie in with Gifted, the Methodist Church's 2025 Christmas campaign.

Inside, you'll find ideas for eight worship services, running from the start of Advent (Sunday 30 November) through to Epiphany. Christmas Day falls on a Thursday this year. Each service can be used on its own, but they work beautifully as a full journey through the season. You'll also find suggestions for a carol service and a Blue Christmas service, which can be held at any time to suit your community.

New for this year is an accompanying small group guide, designed to follow the same themes and help people explore them in a more conversational way. This can be downloaded from methodist.org.uk/ChristmasResources

This year's theme encourages us to give thanks by recognising the gifts in one another. We're inviting everyone to write a personal thank you card to someone they know – simply saying thank you for being the gift that they are. *Gifted* thank you cards can be ordered from methodistpublishing.org.uk

Each service includes a variety of ideas for you to choose from, helping you shape worship that fits your context – whether you're gathering in a chapel, a school, a care home, a chaplaincy hub, or anywhere people come together to encounter God.



Theme

A phrase exploring the Gifted theme.

Scripture passages

Taken from the lectionary. Scripture quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition.

Songs and hymns

Some extra ideas to complement the usual carols. Drawn from the full range of *Singing the Faith* hymn book contents, as well as from the Resources Hub website. All song numbers given refer to *Singing the Faith*.

Opening liturgy

To accompany the lighting of candles throughout Advent, continuing into Christmas. Thanks to the Revd Elaine Halls.

Background notes

Short contextual information for each specific service, exploring how the theme connects to the Bible passages. As a development based on feedback from last year we've gone deeper with the exegesis in these notes, but use them as you need.

Questions

These can be worked up into a sermon or used in a discussion; it's good to give people in the congregation a chance to discuss their faith. These questions will also work in a small group.

Hands-on activities

Fun, intergenerational activities to help make your services pop. More activities and ideas for sharing *Gifted* specifically with children and young people can be found at methodist.org.uk/ChristmasResources

Prayer ideas

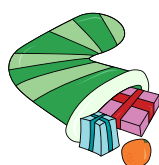
Some use a Christmas tree as a focus. Other prayers are offered which focus on our global Partners and our place as part of the World Church.

The good news to get across

The key idea to land, particularly for newcomers. Say it several times, make it stick!

Ways people can respond

A simple, non-threatening way for people to respond personally to the good news.



Date	Weekly theme	Old Testament	Gospel	Object
30 Nov	You are a Gift	Psalms 122	Matthew 24:36–44	
7 Dec	The Orange in the Stocking	Psalms 72:1–7, 18–19	Matthew 3:1–12	
14 Dec	Give Hope	Psalms 146:5–10	Matthew 11:2–11	
21 Dec	With love from God	Psalms 80:1–7, 17–19	Matthew 1:18–25	
25 Dec	The Best Gift	Psalms 97	Luke 2:1–20	
28 Dec	Handle with Care	Psalms 148	Matthew 2:13–23	
4 Jan	Created with Infinite Care	Psalms 147:12–20	John 1:10–18	
6 Jan	The Gift that Keeps on Giving	Psalms 72:1–7, 10–14	Matthew 2:1–12	

Advent 1

Bible readings

Psalm 122

For the sake of my relatives and friends
I will say, "Peace be within you."

For the sake of the house of the LORD our
God,
I will seek your good.

Matthew 24:36–44

Therefore you also must be ready...

Opening liturgy

Gift-giving God,
**may Advent be for us a time of giving
and receiving**

Lord God of this Advent season, of every
season, every day, minute and second,
give us, we pray, the gift of peace in this
season of Advent.

Bring peace to the world, but also bring
peace within each of us.

Gift-giving God,
**may Advent be for us a time of giving
and receiving**

Lord God, we give ourselves afresh to you
as we step into Advent.

Let us iron the crumples and the creases
from our lives
so that we may be the best gift that we
can be.

Gift-giving God,
**may Advent be for us a time of giving
and receiving**

You are a Gift

Songs and hymns

- 165** Advent candles tell their story
- 166** Christmas is coming
- 169** Come, thou long expected Jesus
- 171** Hills of the north, rejoice
- 177** Lo, he comes with clouds
descending
- 185** Sing we the King who is coming
to reign!

Symbol: Wrapped up present



May we start today and not wait
to become, and to be, the person/people
you want us to be,
so that we can give the best that we can
of you and ourselves, to those around us.

Gift-giving God,
**may Advent be for us a time of giving
and receiving.**



Psalm 122

Psalm 122 is a pilgrim song, traditionally sung on the journey to a festival in Jerusalem. The very name 'Jerusalem' holds within it the word *shalom*: peace. Jerusalem is the city of peace,¹ a gift from God. A gift that was originally for Israel, but also, as envisioned in Isaiah 2, for all people.²

In verses 6–9, the psalm becomes a prayer for the city's wellbeing: for its security, peace and prosperity. These ancient prayers stand in sharp contrast to the historical and present-day reality of Jerusalem, a city too often marked by conflict and instability. Yet the psalm invites us to imagine and pray for an alternative story: one in which Jerusalem, and by extension all communities, become places of *shalom*. Places where peace is not just hoped for, but lived. Places that are a gift to all who dwell there.³

This Advent, we invite you to enact that vision by delivering cards to your neighbours. A simple gesture, but one that recognises them as a gift to your local community. In doing so, you proclaim the prophetic truth: this too can be a place of peace and wellbeing.

Matthew 24:36–44

This is a challenging passage. It gathers several sayings of Jesus, each carrying a strong sense that something significant is coming, though we don't know when. The message is simple, but searching: be ready.

Verse 36 includes a notable textual variation: "nor the Son" appears in some manuscripts of Matthew but is missing in others, as well as in the parallel passages in Mark and Luke. This phrase was historically controversial and fuelled early denials of the equality within the Trinity of Father and Son. And yet, precisely because it would have been uncomfortable for the early church, its inclusion lends authenticity. Difficult or 'awkward' sayings are more likely to be genuine – less likely to be invented. Some modern scholars interpret this phrase as part of Christ's *kenosis* – his willing self-emptying during the incarnation.

Verses 40–41 show pairs of people doing everyday tasks – one is taken, one left. The meaning is ambiguous. Is it better to be taken or left? When read alongside the reference to Noah, where those taken by the flood perished, we might conclude that being left behind is preferable.

Think of preparing a gift. Before you can give it, there's usually some work to do: removing packaging, peeling off the price label, maybe taking off a sale sticker. As followers of Jesus, called to be a gift to the world, Advent is a time to consider what in us needs removing. What attitudes, habits or distractions need peeling away? What doesn't belong in the gift?

Jesus says we must be ready for the coming of the Son of Man. As Advent begins, we reflect on what that means – not with fear, but with hope. We are being made ready, refined and wrapped in grace, to be given as gifts of peace to the world.

1 Artur Weiser, *The Psalms* (1962) London: SCM, p. 750–751.

2 Walter Brueggemann and William H Bellinger, *Psalms*, (2014) New York: Cambridge University Press, p. 528.

3 Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, p. 530.

Questions for discussion

Peace as a gift

Psalm 122 is a prayer for peace – *shalom* – for Jerusalem and beyond.

- Where do you see glimpses of *shalom* in your local community?
- What small acts can we offer this Advent to help our neighbourhood become a place of peace?
- How might a simple card to a neighbour be a prophetic act?

A city for all people

Jerusalem, once a gift for Israel, is envisioned in Isaiah as a gift for all peoples.

- What would it look like for your community (or church) to be a gift to everyone – including those who feel excluded or unwelcome?
- How can we help our spaces become places of belonging?

Becoming a gift

The heart of both passages is about transformation: from individuals on a journey to a city of peace; from daily routines to readiness for Christ.

- How might you become more of a gift to those around you this Advent?
- What practical or prayerful commitments could you take up to prepare the way for peace?

Peeling back the packaging

Before giving a gift, we often need to remove the wrapping, tags or clutter.

- What needs to be removed from your life this Advent to make you more fully available to God and others?
- Are there fears, distractions, or attachments that keep you from being fully present?

Hands-on activities

Thank you cards for the community

Materials: Blank cards (*Gifted* thank you cards can be ordered from Methodist Publishing), pens, stickers, stamps, envelopes.

Activity: Invite participants to write cards to deliver to neighbours, local workers, or community spaces. For example, you could write:

Thank you for always taking the time to make me a cuppa and have a good chat, I always feel better after our talks.

Thank you for the time you spend fixing things rather than throwing them away.

Thank you for the kindness you show every client at the food bank, always asking their name and putting them at ease.

Reflection: Discuss how this small gesture can proclaim the prophetic truth that *this too* can be a place of peace.

Peeling back the packaging

Materials: Luggage tags, pens, ribbon, small stickers.

Activity: On one side of the tag, write or draw something God is 'removing' or refining in you this Advent (eg impatience, fear, distraction). On the other side, name a gift God is growing in you (eg kindness, hope, courage). Hang these on a display board or Advent tree.

Reflection: Connect with the idea that being made ready includes peeling away what doesn't belong in the gift.

Refining fire candle craft

Materials: Tealight candles, tissue paper, glue, fine markers.

Activity: Decorate candle holders with words like 'hope', 'ready', 'peace' or with images of flames and stars. As the candle is lit, it becomes a reminder of the refining light of Christ preparing us to be a gift to the world.

Reflection: Use during quiet reflection or a time of confession and commitment.

Prayer ideas

Blessing the cards

As you prepare to send the *Gifted* thank you cards to your neighbours, pray that God will use these cards to touch the hearts of those who receive them in a meaningful and powerful way.

Prayer of thanksgiving for our gifts

Invite the congregation to silently reflect on one personal gift or talent they have received from God. Then pray aloud:

"God of abundant grace, thank you for the gifts you have placed within each of us – gifts of kindness, wisdom, courage, creativity and love. May we cherish these gifts and share them freely, knowing that through us, your love is made visible in the world. Amen."

Intercessory prayer: Gifts for our neighbours

Pray for the people in your community and church, focusing on how each person is a gift to those around them. For example:

"We pray for our neighbours who bring joy, support and care to our community. Help us to see and celebrate their gifts. Guide us in using our gifts to build a neighbourhood where everyone feels valued and loved."

Global prayers

There are over 80 million Methodists worldwide and the Methodist Church in Britain has over 100 partner churches and organisations around the globe. We represent an incredibly diverse and creative part of God's kingdom. A gift!

Loving God,

From Pacific Ocean waves to mountains of South America,

from American highways to bustling African cities,

from huge Korean prayer meetings to small European village churches,

diversity of language, worship, words and theology,

creativity of song, liturgy, education, justice and evangelism,

we praise you and we thank you for the gift you make us.

The gift of being a community of faith, the gift of each other, the gift we can be to our communities as we share God's love for all with neighbours near and far.

Amen.

The good news to get across

This Advent, don't just wait – prepare. Let God peel back what's not needed. And as you're refined, reshaped and wrapped in grace – become a gift.

A gift of peace to your neighbour.

A gift of justice in your community.

A gift of love in a world that's longing for hope.

This is the call of Advent: **Be ready. Be real. Be the gift.**

Ways people can respond

Write a *Gifted* thank you card and deliver it to someone.

Advent 2

The Orange in the Stocking

Bible readings

Psalm 72:1–7, 18–19

May he judge your people with righteousness
and your poor with justice.

May the mountains yield prosperity for the people,
and the hills, in righteousness.

Matthew 3:1–12

Bear fruit worthy of repentance...

Songs and hymns

- 165** Advent candles tell their story
- 166** Christmas is coming
- 170** Darkness like a shroud covers the earth
- 173** Into the darkness of this world
- 182** On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry
- 184** Round orange, round orange, you serve as a sign
- 189** Wild and lone the prophet's voice

Opening liturgy

Gift-giving God,
may Advent be for us a time of giving and receiving

Holy God, the greatest gift giver of all times,
you are not the 'stocking filler' or little extra,
you are the greatest and best gift that can be given.

Gift-giving God,
may Advent be for us a time of giving and receiving

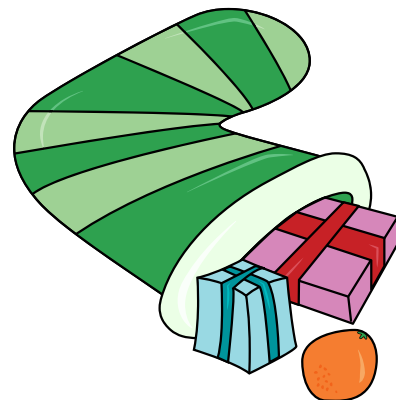
Holy God, you call us to be the gift of God to neighbours and strangers.

You call us to be life giving to all those we encounter.

You call us to be a blessing to the Church and the world.

Gift-giving God,
may Advent be for us a time of giving and receiving

Symbol: A Christmas stocking with an orange in it



May we sort the wheat from the chaff in our lives.

May we not be just little stocking filler extras but full to overflowing with your love.

May we truly seek to be the holy gift you call us to be.

Gift-giving God,
may Advent be for us a time of giving and receiving.



Psalm 72:1–7, 18–19

Those who hold power are called to be a gift to others. In verses 1–4 of this psalm, we find a vision for leadership shaped by justice and compassion. The king is not celebrated for wealth or might, but for defending the poor, upholding justice and ending oppression.⁴ True authority, the psalm suggests, is only valid when it serves the most vulnerable and seeks the wellbeing of all.⁵

This is a challenge to every person or institution with influence – whether in politics, faith communities, workplaces or homes. Power is not for self-preservation but for service.

It's a reminder to us, too, as the Church: we are called to be a gift to the world. Not only as individuals, but as a justice-seeking, peace-making community. And we do have power – the power to speak, to act, to stand with those who are hurting, and to work for change.

We will return to this psalm in the service for Epiphany.

Matthew 3:1–12

John the Baptist comes preaching repentance – literally calling people to change the way they think. So what needs to change?

Verse 8 gives us the heart of his message: “Bear fruit worthy of repentance.” Matthew twice later uses the metaphor of a good tree that bears good fruit. The image of fruit might remind us of Proverbs 11:30:

The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life,
and the wise capture souls.

Fruit grows out of a fundamental disposition of the heart, rather than being something that is just done.⁶ Our lives can become life-giving for others – a source of blessing, nourishment, and hope. We become, in ourselves, a gift to the world.

If we're wondering what this fruit might look like, Paul's list in Galatians 5:22–23 gives us a good clue:

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

This is the kind of fruit everyone longs to receive. Like the orange at the bottom of a traditional Christmas stocking, these are gifts that are familiar, but are nevertheless fresh and joyful. As part of this campaign we invite you to deliver cards to your neighbours, telling them what you appreciate about them. This is an opportunity to name the fruit growing in each other, to recognise each other as holy gifts.

4 Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, p. 313.

5 *ibid*, p. 316.

6 Eduard Schweitzer, *The Good News according to Matthew*, (1975) London: SPCK, p. 49.

The food imagery continues with John's warning about winnowing. Just as an orange must be peeled before it can be enjoyed, grain must be threshed and winnowed before it becomes useful. In the ancient world, this meant beating the wheat and tossing it into the air so the wind could carry away the chaff – leaving behind only what nourishes and sustains.⁷

This Advent, we're invited to take that image seriously. What in us needs to be cleared away? What coverings, distractions or attitudes need to be stripped back? Can we let the wind of the Spirit move freely through us, removing all that is fruitless and leaving only what brings life?

Questions for discussion

Power as a gift

Psalm 72 describes leadership not in terms of dominance or wealth, but in justice, compassion and advocacy for the vulnerable.

- Where do you see examples – past or present – of people using their power as a gift to others?
- What influence do you have (at home, school, work, church, community), and how might you use it more intentionally for others' wellbeing?

Repentance as reorientation

John the Baptist calls people to repent – to reframe how they think and live.

- What might need to change in our attitudes or assumptions for us to become a better gift to those around us?
- Are there habits, fears or priorities that distract us from bearing fruit?

Fruit that blesses others

Matthew 3:8 calls us to "bear fruit worthy of repentance," and Galatians 5:22–23 gives us a picture of what that fruit looks like.

- Which of the fruits of the Spirit do you see growing in yourself – or long to see more of?
- How can we help each other notice and celebrate these qualities, like the cards campaign suggests?

The Church as a gift

Psalm 72 envisions a just kingdom as a blessing to the whole earth.

- What would it look like for your church to be experienced by the community as a gift?
- How can we reflect God's generosity and justice more visibly and practically this Advent?

Hands-on activities

Fruit of the Spirit tree

Materials: Large poster or cardboard tree outline, coloured paper or card (cut into fruit shapes), pens, glue or Blu-Tack.

Activity: Invite each person to write on a fruit one quality they've seen grow in someone else in the group or community – like kindness, joy or patience. Add the fruit to a shared 'Fruit of the Spirit' tree. Use Paul's list from Galatians 5:22–23 as labels around the tree or create a mini version for each person to take home.

Reflection: Talk about how recognising fruit in others is a gift that encourages growth and builds peace.

Peeling back the layers

Materials: Paper circles or fruit cut-outs layered with flaps, pens, glue.

Activity: Create layered 'fruit' with peel-away flaps. On the outside layers, write things that get in the way of love (eg fear, impatience, distraction). Underneath, write or draw the fruit of the Spirit waiting to emerge.

Reflection: What needs to be 'peeled away' in us this Advent to reveal the gift we're meant to be?

Fruit garland of justice

Materials: Cardboard fruit shapes, string, clothes pegs, pens.

Activity: Write on each fruit an example of someone using their influence as a gift – for justice, compassion or healing (past or present, global or local). String the fruits into a garland to hang in a prayer space or community room.

Reflection: Link back to Psalm 72's vision of leadership that defends the poor and ends oppression.

Fruit salad

Materials: Selection of fruit (bear in mind any allergies), chopping board, plate/bowl, knives (safety ones for younger children).

Activity: Prepare the fruit for a fruit salad. What needs to be peeled away or removed in order to eat it? Why is that? Enjoy the sensory experience of touching, smelling, tasting and eating the fruit – maybe trying something new.

Reflection: Which fruits or flavours did we prefer? How does this help us to understand the range of fruits of the spirit and how God gives various ones to each of us? Wonder together about which fruit might best describe us.

Prayer ideas

Peaceful pause

Invite the congregation to close their eyes and take deep, slow breaths together. As they breathe out, encourage them to silently pray for God's peace to fill their hearts and spread into their communities.

Patience reflection

Ask everyone to think about a situation where they struggled to be patient recently. Encourage them to silently offer that situation to God, asking for strength to grow in patience.

Joyful gratitude

Invite people to name silently or aloud one thing they're thankful for today. Then pray together, thanking God for the gift of joy that isn't dependent on circumstances but flows from God.

Kindness chain

Begin by silently praying for one person in the group or community who needs kindness. Then invite each person to 'pass on' the prayer by naming someone else to pray for, creating a chain of kindness prayers.

Gentleness meditation

Encourage the group to sit quietly and picture a gentle, calming presence – like a soft breeze or a kind touch – and ask God to help them embody that gentleness in their words and actions.

Global prayers

As part of a worldwide family of Methodist and United Churches, invite the congregation to pray particularly for God's Church across the continent of Africa.

Gracious God, we thank you that your Spirit is at work in all parts of the world, bearing fruit even in the most difficult of circumstances. In the face of climate change, poverty, injustice, conflict and disaster we see your Church standing firm – a witness to your love and grace.

May love guide the Church as it walks alongside communities in pain.

May joy be found even in the small victories.

May peace reign where there is conflict, and may your Spirit empower leaders working for reconciliation and dialogue.

Grant patience to those working tirelessly for change, often without recognition or immediate results.

Let kindness overflow in acts of compassion, thinking particularly for the flood relief efforts of the Methodist Church in Southern Africa.

May goodness shine through sustainable farming, clean water initiatives and care for creation.

Strengthen the Church's faithfulness as it continues to serve, teach and worship you.
May gentleness be present in every word and action, especially in places of trauma and loss.
And may self-control guide decisions and leadership, rooted in wisdom and humility.
As members of the global body of Christ, help us to remain attentive to your wider world.
Amen.

The good news to get across

Let the Spirit clear away what clutters and distracts,
and shape you into a holy gift –
a tree of life in a world hungry for hope.
This is your calling: **Bear fruit. Be bold. Be the gift.**

Ways people can respond

Ask the group to quietly consider one way they can show goodness or generosity in the coming week. Invite them to make a simple prayer commitment to act on it.

Advent 3

Give Hope

Bible readings

Psalm 146:5–10

The Lord sets the prisoners free;
the Lord opens the eyes of the blind.
The Lord lifts up those who are
bowed down;
the Lord loves the righteous.
The Lord watches over the strangers;
he upholds the orphan and
the widow...

Matthew 11:2–11

...the blind receive their sight, the lame
walk, those with a skin disease are
cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are
raised, and the poor have good news
brought to them.

Opening liturgy

Gift-giving God,
**may Advent be for us a time of giving
and receiving**

Heavenly God, you speak to us through
messengers, words and deeds,
the rhythm, the beat of your gift never
ceases, never stops or falters or fails.

Your gift is for life, not limited by time or
space.

Gift-giving God,
**may Advent be for us a time of giving
and receiving**

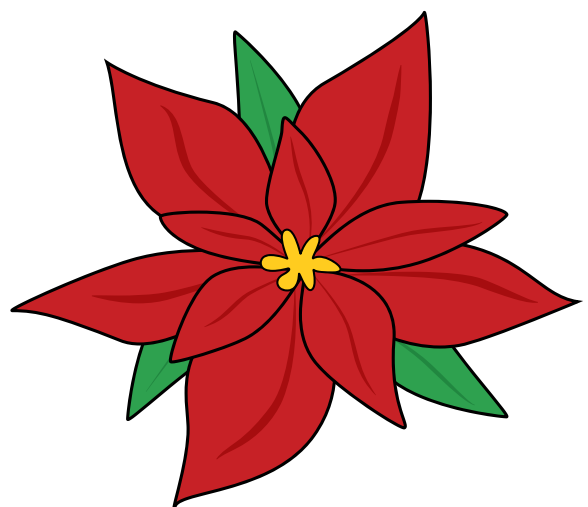
Heavenly God, you challenge us to be the
heartbeat of love to our community.

You challenge and call us to be a
constant power for good.

Songs and hymns

- 165** Advent candles tell their story
- 166** Christmas is coming
- 167** Colours of day
- 171** Hark the glad sound!
- 179** My Lord! what a morning
- 180** O come, O come, Immanuel
- 183** Praise to the God who clears
the way
- 188** There's a light upon the mountains

Symbol: Poinsettia



You inspire us to be the bringers of good
news.

Gift-giving God,
**may Advent be for us a time of giving
and receiving.**

Heavenly God, may we be up to the challenges you set before us.

May we give you time in our busy days, in our list making and our shopping,

so that we are buzzing with your Spirit as your gift to all we meet.

Gift-giving God,
may Advent be for us a time of giving and receiving

Background notes

Psalm 146:5–10

This is the first of the final five psalms that serve as a conclusion to the whole book.

Today's lectionary reading gives us the second half of the psalm, which opens with the bold declaration that God is both our hope and our help.⁸ It then offers reasons why God is worthy of such trust.⁹

In verse 6, we're reminded that God is the creator of all things – even the sea, which in Scripture often symbolises chaos and evil. Yet the world is not as God intends it to be; creation is marred by oppression, injustice and poverty (v.7).¹⁰

Having named this disorder, verses 7b – 9 go on to describe God's mission to set things right: liberating the oppressed, giving sight (at least metaphorically), lifting up the downtrodden, welcoming strangers, and upholding orphans and widows. God loves the righteous (those who join in this mission) but will bring the wicked, those who perpetuate injustice, to ruin.

The psalm concludes with a celebration of God's eternal reign. The reordering of creation described here is not temporary. It is the way things will be, for evermore.¹¹ Praise the Lord!

Matthew 11:2–11

In this passage, we return to John the Baptist, but much later in his story. No longer is he preaching in the wilderness; now he is imprisoned and questioning whether Jesus is truly the Messiah.¹²

Jesus responds by sending a message to reassure John: a gift of hope. He offers a collage of prophecies from Isaiah, verses that both he and John likely held dear. These were words that pointed to a new age of liberation and restoration. It's clear that both John and Jesus had a deep love for Isaiah 61: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me..."¹³ Jesus is saying that in him, these ancient promises have come to life.¹⁴ The long-awaited eschaton has dawned.¹⁵

Everything Jesus mentions in his reply reflects what he has been doing throughout his ministry, as recorded in Matthew chapters 4 to 10. This passage serves as a kind of summary of the work of God through Jesus.¹⁶

Methodist Way of Life: Serve



8 Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, p. 607.

9 Weiser, *The Psalms*, p. 832.

10 Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, p. 530.

11 *ibid.* p. 608.

12 Walter Brueggemann, Charles B. Cousar, Beverly R Gaventa, James D. Newsome, *Texts for Preaching Year A*, (1995) Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, pp. 25–266.

13 Craig A. Evans, *Matthew* p. 233–234

14 Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew*, (1993) Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, p. 121.

15 Schweizer, *The Good News according to Matthew*, p. 256.

16 Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, pp. 174–175.

Notably, Jesus is selective in his use of Isaiah. He omits any verses that focus on punishment, even though such themes are present in the original prophecies. Instead, he highlights healing, restoration and good news.¹⁷

He speaks of the blind receiving sight, perhaps metaphorically as well as physically, as people begin to perceive the unseen world. The lame walk, the lepers are cleansed (a striking expansive addition, since lepers are not mentioned in these Isaiah texts), the deaf hear – again, maybe also metaphorically – as people finally begin to ‘get it’. The dead are raised, and, most significantly, placed where emphasis falls, the poor receive good news.¹⁸

And so too can we offer gifts of hope to those around us. As we live a Methodist Way of Life we can:

- share insight and understanding (pray, learn, notice)
- inspire people to get up and follow Jesus (tell)
- offer a deep confidence that life is stronger than death (live)
- proclaim good news to people experiencing poverty serve (challenge, flourish, serve) – although we must also remember, as verse 6 reminds us, that not everyone is ready to hear it – yet.

Questions for discussion

Doubts

John the Baptist expresses doubt from prison – “Are you the one?”

- What does this moment teach us about faith, doubt and hope?
- How do you respond to times when God seems different from what you expected?

All good

Jesus selects verses from Isaiah that focus on healing and good news, leaving out judgment.

- What does this tell us about the nature of Jesus’ mission?
- How can we reflect this in how we speak and act?

The poor receive good news

- What does “good news” mean to people experiencing poverty or exclusion today?
- How are we called to be bearers of that news?

You are a gift

Jesus’ message to John becomes a gift of reassurance and hope.

- In your own life, how might you offer gifts of hope to others?
- Which aspects of the Methodist Way of Life (pray, learn, tell, serve, challenge, etc) help you do that?

17 Schweizer, *The Good News according to Matthew*, p. 256.

18 *ibid.* p. 256–257.

Hands-on activities

Healing hands wreath

Materials: Paper hand shapes, markers, string or hoop for wreath.

Activity: Trace each participant's hand on paper or foam. On each hand, write or draw ways to show God's healing and care (eg welcoming strangers, helping the oppressed, sharing good news). Assemble the hands into a wreath as a sign of community working together to bring restoration.

Reflection: Reflect on God's mission and how we can join in with 'healing hands'.

Award badges

Materials: Order a set of badges from methodistpublishing.org.uk

Activity: Invite several people to pick a badge to award to someone in the congregation who they think lives out that practice well.

Gift the community

Materials: Appropriate gifts and cards.

Activity: Reflect on the places in your community that may appreciate a gift at this time eg: a care home, school, doctors surgery. What gift could you make or give that would express thanks for all they do for the people in their care? Some ideas: bake some cupcakes, give a poinsettia plant, a tub of sweets or chocolates.

Reflection: Wonder together about how the Church could or does serve hand in hand alongside these local places.

Prayer ideas

Hope in the headlines

Invite people to silently call to mind a news story or place in the world where hope is needed. Read aloud a few current headlines (without commentary), then allow space for silent or spoken prayer for those situations.

The world needs...

Invite people, one at a time, to finish the sentence:

"The world needs..." (eg compassion, laughter, justice, healing).

After each word is spoken, the congregation responds together:

"Lord, bring it through us."

People prayers

Cut out a paper chain of people by folding a sheet of paper and cutting around the outline of a 'person' shape from the folded edge. Write on each 'person' someone in your community who cares for others: eg a teacher, a nurse, a carer, a refuse collector. Pray for them and the work they do. Create a long chain with all the people taped together to represent your community.

Global prayers

Invite people to share in the prayer of the Revd Felipe Cortés, the National Ecclesiastical Secretary of the Iglesia Metodista de Chile.

Hope is seeing growth and flourishing among the droughts of our lives.

Hope is feeling that a new world is possible and that human beings can change.

Hope is trusting that justice, goodness, forgiveness, peace and reconciliation always triumphs over every sign of evil.

Hope is feeling that Christ acts among us and with us, placing that new world in our hearts.

Amen.

The good news to get across

The world badly needs your gift; you can bring hope. Lift others up, and speak good news, especially to those the world overlooks. **Hope is here.**

Ways people can respond

Ask people to dwell on the twelve Methodist Way of Life practices, perhaps using the **Pocket Guides**. Ask God to make one practice stand out, the one that they can focus on this week as a way of being a gift to other people. For example, they might *Pray* for their work colleagues each morning, or make an effort to be *Open* to new people that they encounter.

21 December 2025

Advent 4

With Love from God

Bible readings

Psalm 80:1–7, 17–19

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

Matthew 1:18–25

...she was found to be with child from the
Holy Spirit.

Songs and hymns

- 165 Advent candles tell their story
- 166 Christmas is coming
- 168 Come, Lord Jesus, come
- 174 Light a candle in a darkened place
- 175 Light of the world

- 176 Like a candle flame
- 178 Long ago, prophets knew
- 181 Of the Father's love begotten
- 186 Tell out my soul
- 187 The Angel Gabriel from heaven
came

Opening liturgy

Gift-giving God,
**may Advent be for us a time of giving and
receiving**

Holy God, as Advent draws to a close, your
gospel shines all the more brightly
with messages of hope and promise, of
love and care,
of gifts already given and gifts for the
present and for the future.

Gift-giving God,
**may Advent be for us a time of giving and
receiving**

Holy God, remind us afresh of the Angel's
appearances,
of the sparkle and shine that their words
and their messages add to our everyday
lives.

May we be able to offer their messages
and gifts with love, compassion and care.

Symbol: Gift tag



Gift-giving God,
**may Advent be for us a time of giving and
receiving**

Holy God, sharing your love is work that is
often hard.

But when we sit back and look at what a
difference we've made we rejoice that we
are made with love and live to love in your
name.

Gift-giving God,
**may Advent be for us a time of giving and
receiving.**



Psalm 80:1–7, 17–19

Today's psalm is a sorrowful lament over the devastation caused by the destruction of Jerusalem. Throughout the psalm, God is addressed as *Yahweh Sabaoth*, the Lord of Hosts: a title that evokes divine power and military authority.

In verses 4–6, the writer holds God responsible for the suffering, describing it as the result of divine anger.

Yet verse 7 marks a turning point. The psalmist pleads, “let your face shine, that we may be saved.” Because the pain came from God, God must also desire to heal and save. This plea is repeated at the end of the psalm, forming a refrain of hope and restoration.¹⁹

Matthew 1:18–25

Matthew's account focuses more on the conception and naming of Jesus than on the birth itself. Joseph is portrayed as an honourable man – discreet, compassionate, and faithful. His response to a bewildering situation shows a quiet courage rooted in love.²⁰

The conception, Matthew tells us, is the work of God.²¹ In the Old Testament, the Spirit of God is understood as God's creative force – hovering over the waters, breathing life into dust. From this flows a deep conviction in Jewish tradition that every child is ultimately a gift from God. Perhaps that's why Matthew recounts the miraculous conception with such restraint.²² For him, every life is sacred. Every life is a gift from God.

Jesus was born into a loving relationship, and named with love. Two names are given: Jesus, which means “God saves” – pointing to forgiveness, healing,²³ and God's love is not distant or abstract. It draws near.

At the very end of Matthew's Gospel, the risen Jesus says, “I am with you always, to the end of the age.”²⁴ The gift given then remains with us still. Jesus is the true gift to us all, divine favour manifested.²⁵

Questions for discussion

Let your face shine

Verse 7 marks a shift: “Let your face shine, that we may be saved.”

- What kind of gift is God's presence in a dark or painful time?
- Where do you long to see God's face shine – what gift of restoration are you waiting or hoping for?

19 Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, pp. 348–350.

20 Brueggemann, Cousar, Gaventa, Newsome, *Texts for Preaching Year A* pp. 34–35.

21 *ibid.* p. 35.

22 Schweizer, *The Good News according to Matthew*, p. 30.

23 Brueggemann, Cousar, Gaventa, Newsome, *Texts for Preaching Year A* pp. 35–36.

24 *ibid.* p. 36.

25 Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, p.18.

Joseph's example

Joseph responds with compassion and integrity in a bewildering situation.

- What kind of gift does Joseph offer in his quiet courage and obedience?
- Have you ever received the gift of someone else's calm, faithful presence in a difficult time?

Creative force

Matthew tells us that Jesus' conception is the work of the Holy Spirit – the creative force of God.

- How might we learn to see every life – including our own – as a gift from God?

Jesus, Emmanuel

Jesus is given two names: Jesus ("God saves") and Emmanuel ("God with us").

- What do these names reveal about the kind of gift Jesus is to the world?
- When have you experienced God's presence as a gift – unexpected, personal or sustaining?

Hands-on activities

"Let your face shine" sun catchers

Materials: Transparent plastic sheets or laminating pouches, tissue paper, glue sticks, scissors, string.

Activity: Cut sun shapes or circles from the plastic sheets. Tear or cut colourful tissue paper pieces to glue onto the plastic, creating a stained-glass effect. Display these in your church or home windows.

Reflection: As children or participants create their sun catchers, talk about the psalm's plea for God's face to shine on us, bringing light and hope even in hard times. Hang them where sunlight can shine through as a reminder of God's presence and healing.

'Names of Jesus' banner or mobile

Materials: Paper or card, markers, string, beads, sticks or a hanger.

Activity: Write or decorate the names "Jesus" and "Emmanuel" on cards. Add definitions or pictures illustrating what these names mean ("God saves," "God with us"). Assemble them on a banner or mobile.

Reflection: Discuss how Jesus' names tell us about God's gift to the world – presence, salvation and love.

Folded hearts of love

Materials: Origami paper or any paper squares.

Activity: Fold the paper into a heart shape
(instruction video here: youtu.be/PZcu5kf7Jj0)

Write inside one of the names of Jesus and the names of one or two people who are yet to recognise God's love for them.

Reflection: consider ways you can demonstrate God's love to those you've named.

Prayer ideas

Light a light

Set up a table with tealights (real or LED), sand tray or safe holders. Invite people to light a candle as a prayer for someone who needs to know that God is with them. You might play soft instrumental music or offer quiet phrases like: "Jesus, be near" or "God with us – come close."

'You are loved' prayer walk

Invite the congregation to walk slowly around the space (or outside if possible), praying silently with this phrase for themselves or others:

"Made with love. Love to give."

Encourage them to notice who or what stirs their compassion – a reminder of who they are called to love.

Folded heart prayers

Using the origami hearts made previously, spend time praying for each person that has been named.

Global Prayers

In the middle of the slums of Nairobi, one Methodist Church posts a sign saying: "A place where everybody is somebody." This sums up the ministry of service and the message of God's love for all, to which Methodists throughout Africa are committed.

Lord, we give you thanks that you love every person and for all who witness to your love in every place and especially today in Africa.

We give thanks for Methodist Church transforming the lives of people with disabilities in Tanzania; for the presence of the Methodist Church amongst the tribal peoples of northern Kenya, enhancing water conservation and social justice; for Church health and educational institutions throughout the continent; and for all who serve the poor and marginalised in countless ways.

May we your Church always be a gift to the world, a beacon of light, of hope and of healing and life. Amen.

The good news to get across

The conception of Jesus is described as the work of God's Spirit, the creative force that brings life. This reminds us that every child, every life, is a sacred gift from God, made with deep love. **Your life itself is a precious gift.**

Jesus is the ultimate gift: given to us so we may know God's presence, grace and favour every day of our lives.

Ways people can respond

Display a picture of Mary cradling the baby Jesus. Invite people to imagine themselves in the position of the child, being cradled by God.

25 December 2025

Christmas Day

The Best Gift

Bible readings

Psalm 97

The Lord is king! Let the earth rejoice...

Luke 2:1-20

Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.

Songs and hymns

Carols 190–222

Opening liturgy

Emmanuel, God is with us!

The Lord is King! Let earth rejoice!

A babe was born in Bethlehem, homeless,
stateless,
laid in a manger surrounded by love
unconditional.

Jesus the Christ Child born for each one
of us.

Emmanuel, God is with us!

The Lord is King! Let earth rejoice!

A babe, a gift, the best, treasured, adored,
worshipped;
with Mary let us ponder the greatness of
the gift,
treasuring it beyond measure in the
depths of our being.

Emmanuel, God is with us!

The Lord is King! Let earth rejoice!

Symbol: Baby Jesus in a crib, with
a gift ribbon and bow



A God-given babe whose very being
changed the world order
changes us, transform us, empowers and
enlivens us.

Let us now and for always treasure the
gift in our hearts.

Emmanuel, God is with us!

The Lord is King! Let earth rejoice!



Psalm 97

This psalm is one of several that proclaim God as King over all creation.

It unfolds in three main sections. Verses 2–5 describe God’s arrival with vivid and awe-inspiring imagery: thick clouds, fire and lightning, all signalling a dramatic and overwhelming presence. This vision contrasts with the gentler coming of Jesus, whose arrival was just as world-shaking in its significance.

Verses 6 to 9 describe how all creation responds to the presence of God the King. Heaven proclaims God’s righteousness, and all people see God’s glory. Even false idols are brought low. This invites us to reflect on how both creation and people responded, and still respond, to the incarnation of Christ.

In the final section, the psalm speaks of the gifts given to those who love what is good and turn from evil. God protects, rescues, and fills their lives with light and joy.²⁶

Luke 2:1–20

Throughout this series, we’ve been exploring how each of us is a gift, made with love, and how we can be that gift to those around us. With this reading, we return to the heart of the story. We hear once more of the ultimate expression of love: Jesus, the best gift.

Luke’s telling is rich with detail. He lingers on the small things, like the way Mary wraps her newborn in swaddling cloths. A tender gesture, deeply ordinary, yet deeply meaningful. This was what any Ancient Near Eastern mother would do for her child.²⁷ It was an act of care and love.²⁸

In the Old Testament, swaddling is symbolic. In Wisdom 7:4–5, it’s a sign of nurture and belonging.²⁹ In contrast, Ezekiel 16:4 paints a tragic picture of an unwanted child left unswaddled, a sign of neglect.³⁰ Luke’s image is deliberate: this child is cherished. This gift is wrapped in love.

The angel’s announcement brings good news, a word the Roman Empire used for military victory or political propaganda. But here, it’s reclaimed.³¹ This isn’t the arrival of a conqueror. It’s the birth of a child.

The good news comes *today*. This is a word Luke uses again and again to mark a turning point, the breaking in of God’s new reality. Something has shifted. The gift has come.³²

The shepherds rush to see it for themselves. They become the first witnesses, the first to receive and share the news. And Mary? She treasures all these words in her heart. The Greek word Luke uses is ‘rich’. It means to cherish, to turn something over again and again. In Genesis 37:11, Jacob “keeps” Joseph’s dream in his mind. In Daniel 4:28, a mystery is held and pondered. Mary does the same.

26 Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, pp. 418–419.

27 Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke* (1983) New York: Doubleday, p. 408.

28 C. F. Evans, *Saint Luke* (1990) London: SCM, p. 199.

29 Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke*, p. 394.

30 Evans, *Saint Luke* p. 199.

31 Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (1997) Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, pp. 133–134.

32 Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke*, p. 409.

She receives the moment as a mystery to be held carefully, turned over slowly, and treasured deeply.³³

This story is not just about what happened then. It's also about what is happening now. The gift has come. The good news is for today. And as people made with love, we are called to receive it, treasure it and share it.

Questions for discussion

The gift of Jesus

Jesus is described as the ultimate expression of love – the best gift.

- What does this story tell us about how God gives?
- How do you receive the gift of Christ in your life today?

Swaddling bands

Mary swaddles Jesus – a small, ordinary gesture, filled with meaning.

- What does it mean to you that God's love comes wrapped in such tender, human ways?
- How can small, everyday acts become gifts of love to others?

Good news, repurposed

The angel's good news reclaims a word often used for conquest and applies it to a child.

- How is the birth of Jesus a radically different kind of gift than the world expects?
- What might it look like to carry that kind of good news into your own community?

The gift has come

And as people made with love, we are called to receive the gift of Jesus, treasure it and share it.

- What does it mean to you that the Christmas story is still unfolding now?
- How are you being called to live as someone gifted and someone who gives?

Hands-on activities

"Swaddled with love" baby Jesus dolls

Materials: Small cloth scraps or felt, cotton balls, old fashioned wooden pegs, wooden beads or small doll heads, glue or thread.

Activity: Create simple baby Jesus figures wrapped in soft cloth "swaddling clothes." Encourage participants to think about the care and love Mary showed by wrapping Jesus carefully.

Reflection: Talk about how Jesus came wrapped in love, a precious gift to the world.

33 *ibid.* p. 413.

'Treasure the moment' memory boxes

Materials: Small boxes or jars, decorations, paper slips, pens.

Activity: Decorate a box or jar to be a 'treasure chest'. Invite people to write or draw something they want to treasure this Christmas, like God's love, hope, or a special moment, and place it inside.

Reflection: Connect this with Mary treasuring the words of the angels and the birth of Jesus in her heart.

Parcel of Good News!

Materials: Wrap up a gift for sharing in multiple layers, with each layer containing a card that includes a good news phrase: eg "Born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah" or "This thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us."

Activity: As the parcel is passed around and unwrapped, tell the story with each layer removed, sharing a specific moment.

Reflection: Wonder together about which part of the story is our favourite and what the good news of Jesus' birth means to us.

Prayer ideas

Name the gift

Ask the congregation to call out (or write silently if more reflective) what kind of gift Jesus is to them today. For example:

"Jesus is my peace."

"Jesus is light in the dark."

"Jesus is God with me."

After each one, all respond:

"Thank you, God, for the gift of Jesus."

Giving God the Glory

Just as the angels gave God glory, pray and give thanks for the good news of Jesus' birth.

Use the British Sign Language translation of Glory as a gesture of praise. Watch it here:

[Glory / Glorify \(Giving God the Glory\) - Christian BSL](#)

Global Prayers

Prince of Peace,

You came to us as a baby – fragile, swaddled and laid in a manger. Born into a land under occupation. Today we remember your birth in Bethlehem, and we pray for the same land, still aching for peace.

We lift before you the people of the land called Holy, where children continue to be born into conflict and parents cradle their little ones amidst violence, fear and uncertainty. Wrap them, O God, in your mercy. Bring justice and peace.

Emmanuel, God with us,
be with them now. Amen.

The good news to get across

Jesus is the gift we receive at Christmas – a treasure for our hearts.

At Christmas, we celebrate the incredible gift of Jesus: God's love wrapped in human flesh, coming into our world to bring hope, peace and new life. This gift isn't just for a moment or a season. It's meant to be cherished deeply within us every day.

When we treasure Jesus in our hearts, we discover a love that transforms us, a peace that steadies us, and a hope that carries us through life's challenges. This gift invites us into relationship with God and calls us to share that love generously with others.

Ways people can respond

Lead a moment of stillness and use this breath prayer:

Breathe in: "Thank you, Jesus"

Breathe out: "God's greatest gift"

Repeat slowly a few times as a way to settle into gratitude and awe.

Include a moment of quiet reflection or journalling where participants consider what they are treasuring this Christmas and how they can carry the gift of Jesus in their hearts like Mary.

Christmas 1

Handle with Care

Bible readings

Psalms 148

Praise the Lord from the earth,
you sea monsters and all deeps...

Matthew 2:13–23

‘Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him’

Songs and hymns

Carols 190–222

- 218** Unto us a boy is born!
- 350** I cannot tell
- 623** A safe stronghold our God is still
- 627** Everyone needs compassion
- 628** Faithful one, so unchanging
- 636** O love that wilt not let me go

Opening liturgy

Emmanuel, God is with us!

The Lord is King! Let earth rejoice!

The God-given gift of Jesus, the gift of love, joy, peace and hope in a fragile babe, laid with care in a manger of hay,
Nurtured and protected by Mary and Joseph.

Emmanuel, God is with us!

The Lord is King! Let earth rejoice!

We do not walk the world alone, we tread in the footsteps of others.

Others do not walk the world alone, they tread in our footsteps.

Together and not alone we are God’s people walking with God.

Emmanuel, God is with us!

The Lord is King! Let earth rejoice!

Symbol: Handle with care sticker/stamp



The world is not always an easy place in which to live,
O God, it is rough and it is tough and it is hard.

Let us handle with care and protection, love, joy, peace and hope all who we meet.

Emmanuel, God is with us!

The Lord is King! Let earth rejoice!



Psalm 148

This is one of the final five psalms that conclude the book – a sweeping hymn of praise that calls all creation to glorify God.

Verses 1–6 focus on the heavens. The psalmist calls upon angels, the sun and moon, shining stars, and even the waters above the skies to praise the Lord. These cosmic beings and forces, created and sustained by God's command, declare God's glory simply by being what they are.

Verses 7–14 shift the attention to the earth. Praise now comes from sea monsters and wild weather – images that, throughout Scripture, often represent chaos or opposition to God. Yet even these untamed forces are called into the chorus of praise, revealing that nothing lies beyond God's reach or purpose.

The psalm gathers together all parts of creation – animals, trees, rulers, young and old – and places them in harmony, united in worship. God's name alone is exalted, and God's people are invited to join this great, universal song.

Matthew 2:13–23

This is a harrowing passage, marked by violence and grief, and stands in stark contrast to the joyful visit of the Magi that comes just before. The beauty of epiphany light is suddenly shadowed by human cruelty and fear.³⁴

This text introduces a major theme in Matthew's Gospel: Jesus as the new Moses, sent to deliver God's people. Just as Moses narrowly escaped death as an infant (Exodus 2), so too does Jesus, rescued from Herod's rage by divine intervention. Both are threatened by powerful rulers, both make a dramatic escape, and both find temporary refuge in Egypt – the very place that once represented slavery.³⁵

This theme continues in later chapters as Jesus passes through water (his baptism), enters the wilderness, and ascends a mountain to teach; all echoes of the Exodus narrative.³⁶

If children are indeed a gift from God, they are gifts in their most fragile form. This passage reminds us not only of the vulnerability of infants, but of the fundamental truth that all human beings are fragile – if not physically, then emotionally, spiritually, or socially.

Recognising our shared vulnerability invites us to live with compassion and care for one another. We are called to handle each other gently, honouring the sacredness of every life – especially in a world where too often, power is used to harm rather than protect.

34 Brueggemann, Cousar, Gaventa, Newsome, *Texts for Preaching Year A* (1995), p. 71.

35 W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *Matthew, A Shorter Commentary* (2004) London: T&T Clarke, pp. 31–35.

36 Evans, p.57.

Questions for discussion

All things praise God

In Psalm 148, even the chaotic forces – sea monsters and wild weather – are invited into the song.

- What does it mean that even things we associate with danger or disorder are still part of God's creation?
- How might this shape the way we understand life's untamed or uncertain moments as places where God is still at work?

Handle with care

We are reminded that children are gifts in their most vulnerable form.

- How might recognising the vulnerability of others lead us to live more gently and compassionately?
- Can you think of a time when someone treated your fragility as sacred – a moment of being truly seen or cared for?

Power

Power is misused in this passage, but God's response is to protect and preserve life.

- How can we become gifts of protection, healing or safety for others today?
- In what ways can we challenge harmful uses of power and honour the God-given gift of every life?

Hands-on activities

Fragile hands mobile

Materials: Paper or card, scissors, string, beads, pipe cleaners, glue, markers.

Activity: Invite participants to trace their hand on paper and cut it out.

On each hand, write or draw moments when they felt cared for or truly seen.

Decorate the hands gently with soft colours, glitter, or small hearts.

Assemble them into a hanging mobile with string and beads, symbolising how fragile hands (and people) need gentle holding and care.

Reflection: The mobile moves gently with air currents – like how our lives need gentle care to flourish.

Eggshell or seedling pots – Handle with care

Materials: Clean eggshell halves or small biodegradable pots, soil, flower or herb seeds, paint or markers.

Activity: Decorate eggshells or pots with gentle messages like “Handle with care,” “Loved,” or “Fragile, precious.” Plant a seed inside and talk about how plants need nurturing and careful tending to grow – just like people need kindness and compassion.

Reflection: Caring for the seedlings becomes a reminder of nurturing vulnerable lives.

Collage of praise

Materials: Roll of plain paper, coloured pens and pencils, sheets of plain paper.

Activity: Highlight all the elements mentioned in the psalm: sun and moon, sea monsters, flying birds, cattle and invite everyone to draw and create one of them. Retell the psalm with each element and drawing being added to the bigger picture.

Reflection: Wonder together about which part of the psalm we like the most or surprises us.

Prayer ideas

Silent Intercession for people who are fragile at the moment

Name different groups of people in need of special care and compassion:

- children without homes
- people living in fear
- people carrying heavy burdens
- the overlooked and unheard

After each one, allow a pause for silent prayer.

You could respond together with:

“God, hold them with care.”

Collage of praise

Gather around the picture created with everyone’s artwork and express your praise either quietly or as a cacophony of sound as everyone speaks together.

Global Prayers

One part of the world that is currently fragile now is Haiti. Up to a million Haitians are facing displacement and the devastating impacts of gang violence creating severe crisis in education, health and food security. In spite of difficult circumstances our global church partner the Haiti District of the Methodist Church in the Caribbean and the Americas (MCCA) is committed to being the hands and feet of Christ for its community.

Loving and faithful God,

In the midst of Haiti's fragility, with lift up the Methodist Church and all who serve within it. Strengthen your people with courage wisdom and hope. May your Spirit bring peace where there is unrest, provision where there is need and healing where there is pain. Let your Church be a beacon of light, rooted in your love and resilient in faith.

In Jesus' name we pray,

Amen.

The good news to get across

The world can be a tough and challenging place, so let's care for one another.

Life isn't always easy. People face struggles, pain and uncertainty all around us. In the midst of this, we are called to be a community that looks out for each other with kindness and compassion.

Caring for one another means noticing the vulnerable, offering support, and sharing hope. It's about creating spaces where people feel safe, valued and loved – even when life feels hard.

Together, we can make a difference by living gently, listening deeply, and acting with heart. In doing so, we become a source of healing and strength in a world that desperately needs it.

Ways people can respond

Invite everyone to hold out their hands, palms up, as if they're gently cradling something precious.

Say:

"In your hands, imagine someone vulnerable – a child, an elderly neighbour, someone lonely, or grieving. Ask God to help you hold them with care, in prayer and in action."

Leave a moment of stillness, then pray aloud:

"God of gentleness, show us how to hold others with tenderness.
May our care be your care."

Christmas 2

Created with
Infinite Care

Bible readings

Psalm 147:12–20

He gives snow like wool;
he scatters frost like ashes.

John 1:1–18

But to all who received him, who believed
in his name, he gave power
to become children of God.

Opening liturgy

Emmanuel, God is with us!

The Lord is King! Let earth rejoice!

And the Word became flesh and lived
among us ... full of grace and truth,
and the mystery and the wonder and the
glory of God are revealed,
and hate is transformed to love and war
transformed to peace and 'want' is given
the 'gift'.

Emmanuel, God is with us!

The Lord is King! Let earth rejoice!

And we find it hard, O God, Father, Son
and Holy Spirit,
to grasp the immensity of your giving and
your gift,
to understand just why you care for us so
very much.

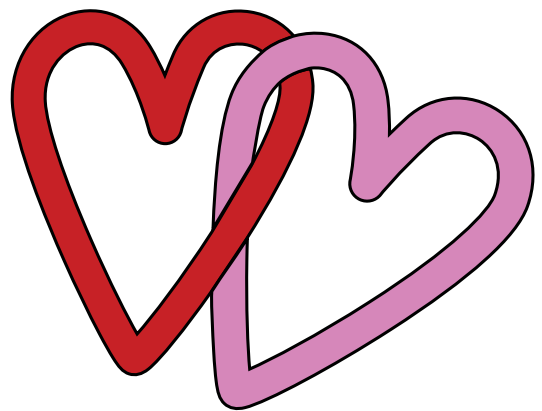
Emmanuel, God is with us!

The Lord is King! Let earth rejoice!

Songs and hymns

- 199 Glory be to God on high
- 202 Hark! The herald-angels sing
- 208 Let heaven and earth combine
- 210 Love came down at Christmas
- 214 Once in royal David's city
- 226 Birth brings a promise of new life
awakening

Symbol: Two overlapping hearts



God's gift to us is that we know that we
each are a child of God:

Special and wanted, loved and cared for,
upheld and treasured.

Our hearts, dust and spirit, joined to God
and God's heart joined to ours eternally.

Emmanuel, God is with us!

The Lord is King! Let earth rejoice!



Psalm 147

This is another of the final five psalms that conclude the book with a crescendo of praise. It's made up of three ancient hymns woven together – and the verses we read today come from the third section.

Verses 13–14 highlight God's care for a particular people, attending to their practical, everyday needs. It's earthy and grounded: God strengthens city gates, blesses children, secures borders and provides abundant wheat. This is praise rooted in the physical and communal – perhaps a natural connection to themes like the 2025 Lent campaign *Soul Food*, where nourishment, security, and belonging all matter deeply.

Then, in verses 15–17, the psalm zooms out to a cosmic scale. God's word races across the earth; snow and frost fall by divine command. It's a reminder that the one who provides for our daily needs is also the one who governs the vastness of creation. We are both dust and spirit – held in the tension between the intimate and the infinite.

John 1:1–18

At the heart of John's prologue is a remarkable promise: that those who receive Christ are given the power, or more precisely the right, to become children of God (v.12). This is not a status we hold by nature, but a gift rooted in God's initiative and generosity. As Barrett notes, for John, life itself is always a gift from God.³⁷

John is careful with language here. He uses the Greek word *tekna* (children) to describe those who believe, while reserving *huios* (son) exclusively for Jesus.³⁸ We are not sons and daughters in the same way that Jesus is the Son. But we are truly, meaningfully, God's children.

And this is not a distant hope – it is a present reality. One of John's companion texts, 1 John 3:2, makes it clear: "Beloved, we are God's children now".³⁹ The transformation begins the moment Christ is received.

The theme of divine abundance, so prominent throughout John's Gospel and explored in last year's Bible Month, is already present here. From God's fullness, we receive grace upon grace: an overflowing generosity that not only forgives but adopts, not only welcomes but empowers.⁴⁰

This passage invites us to receive the gift of Christ with open hearts, and to live now, today, as God's beloved children.

Questions for discussion

God's cosmic sovereignty

- What does it mean to you that the same God who cares for everyday needs also governs the vast cosmos?
- How might this cosmic perspective change the way we pray or live out our faith?

37 C K Barrett, *The Gospel According to St John* (1978) London: SPCK, p. 163.

38 Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (1966) New York: Doubleday, p. 11.

39 *ibid.* p. 11.

40 David F. Ford, *The Gospel of John* (2021) Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, p. 38.

Identity as God's children

- What difference does it make to you that becoming a child of God is a gift and not something earned or natural?
- In what ways is being a "child of God" a present reality for you, and how might that impact your daily life?

Grace upon grace

- What does "grace upon grace" mean to you in your personal faith journey?
- How can receiving God's overflowing generosity empower us to forgive, welcome, and serve others?

Hands-on activities

'Snow and frost' nature collage

Materials: Cotton balls, white felt, glitter, blue construction paper, glue.

Activity: Create a collage inspired by Psalm 147's imagery of snow, frost and hail – representing God's power over creation and care for the earth.

Reflection: Consider how God sustains and strengthens all things, including us.

Grace overflowing jar

Materials: Mason or jam jars, water beads* or clear beads, glitter, blue cellophane or tissue paper.

Activity: Fill jars with beads and a bit of glitter to represent grace flowing abundantly.

Wrap the jar loosely with blue tissue or cellophane to symbolise overflowing grace.

Add a tag with a favourite Scripture about grace or a personal prayer.

Reflection: A tangible reminder of how God's grace is abundant and overflowing.

**Please note, water beads are not recommended for use with children under the age of five. Please plan your activities accordingly.*

A winter walk

Materials: A notebook and pen

Activity: Take a walk in your neighbourhood, perhaps through a park, on a footpath or spend time in your garden. Turn 360 degrees slowly. What do you notice about the world around you – above your head and below your feet? Jot down as many things as possible.

Reflection: Being a part of God's enormous and diverse cosmos.

Prayer ideas

Creation and care

Inspired by Psalm 147's imagery, pray for the healing and protection of the earth, and for wisdom to care for the environment.

Ask for God's strength to uphold the vulnerable, just as God sustains all creation.

Name whispering

Invite people to close their eyes and whisper their own name quietly. Then say:

"God, you created [insert your name] with infinite care."

Then invite them to imagine God saying their name back to them – softly, gently, lovingly.

Breath prayer

Lead the group into a moment of quiet.

Say:

"Breathe in deeply, and as you exhale, imagine resting in God's hands."

"Let every breath remind you: I was created with care. I am held in love."

Repeat the breath prayer:

Inhale: "Created with care"

Exhale: "Held in love"

Close with:

You are known. You are loved. You are God's masterpiece.

Sensory prayers

Collect some natural world items on a winter walk and hold each one in your hand in turn. Close your eyes as you touch and explore it with your fingers. Let the Holy Spirit bring to mind words of God's love for you. Speak with God in response.

Global prayers

As we consider care for creation we share in a prayer from the Revd Dr Tevita Koloaia Havea, President of the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga. Tonga is a Small Island State in the Pacific. It is both on the frontline of the climate crisis, but also at the forefront of climate solutions. The prayer expresses both lament and hope. We join in a spirit of solidarity.

O Lord, our God, so high, so near.

In love and truth our souls you steer.

From Moana's shores our cries arise,
as waters swell and flood our lives.

Bless our leaders firm and strong,
let justice reign and right no wrong.

May wisdom guide their hands each day,

to lead with truth and light the way.

Uplift our youth in faith and grace,
amidst the trials they must face.
Shield them, Lord, from crime and strife,
and lead them to a righteous life.

The sea encroaches, tempests roar,
disasters strike our island shore.
The lost return with broken wings,
O Lord, bring peace to all our days.

O God of mercy, hear our cry.
Be near, O Lord, be ever nigh.
Let hope arise where sorrow stays,
and guide us through these stormy days.

In Christ our Lord we pray.

Amen.

The good news to get across

God's gift to you is the invitation to become a child of God.

This isn't something we earn or achieve – it's a generous gift, freely given. To be a child of God means you are deeply loved, accepted and valued just as you are.

This gift invites you to live with confidence and peace, knowing that no matter what happens, you are held in God's care. It changes everything, transforming your identity and your daily life with purpose and joy.

Ways people can respond

Invite everyone to take a moment of quiet to reflect on God's generous gift: the invitation to be a child of God. Emphasise that this gift is for everyone, whether they already feel it or are just beginning to wonder.

Lead the group in this affirmation:

"God loves me deeply. I am invited to be God's child, accepted just as I am."

Repeat this slowly, allowing space for it to settle.

For those who do not yet feel they are God's child, offer these words:

"If you would like to accept God's gift today and become a child of God, know that you are welcome. You can open your heart to receive this gift now."

Encourage those who want to say yes for the first time to speak a simple prayer silently or aloud:

"God, I want to be your child. Please come into my life and fill me with your love."

Invite them to make themselves known to you after the service if they wish.

Epiphany

The Gift that Keeps on Giving

Bible readings

Psalm 72:1–7, 10–14

In his days may righteousness flourish
and peace abound, until the moon is
no more.

Matthew 2:1–12

The, opening their treasure chests, they
offered him gifts of gold, frankincense,
and myrrh.

Songs and hymns

- 223 A special star
- 224 As with gladness men of old
- 225 Bethlehem, of noblest cities
- 226 Birth brings a promise of new life
awakening
- 227 Brightest and best of the sons of
the morning
- 228 Hail to the Lord's Anointed
- 230 Riding out across the desert
- 231 The silent stars shine down upon us

Opening liturgy

Emmanuel, God is with us!
The Lord is King! Let earth rejoice!

O God of this Christmas season, we have
journeyed together,
have given and received gifts beyond
compare,
and rejoiced once again with
thankfulness for the gift of Jesus.

Emmanuel, God is with us!
The Lord is King! Let earth rejoice!

You keep on giving no matter what, no
matter where, no matter how we live.

You search us out, you find us and
shower us with treasures beyond our
imagining,
with gifts far greater than gold,
frankincense and myrrh.

Emmanuel, God is with us!
The Lord is King! Let earth rejoice!

Symbol: Treasure chest



In thankfulness, let us live our lives
sharing the gift of treasures that we have
with others,
being generous with ourselves, our
compassion, our love, our purpose and
your Spirit,
for the treasure chest that you instil in
us will never be empty but will keep on
giving.

Emmanuel, God is with us!
The Lord is King! Let earth rejoice!



Psalm 72:1–7, 10–14

We first encountered the opening verses of this psalm in the second week of Advent, where the focus is on a king who rules with justice – protecting the poor, judging with righteousness and bringing peace.

Today's reading picks up with verses 10–14. Here, neighbouring kings come in surrender, offering financial tribute. Attributed to Solomon, the psalm reflects a contemporary vision of Israel's dominance – an ideal where foreign powers are not only subdued but contribute their wealth to the nation. In its original context, this is a celebration of political strength.⁴¹

There's a striking irony in using this text for Epiphany. When the Magi bring gifts to Jesus, they are not bowing to a powerful, conquering monarch but to a vulnerable child.⁴²

Verses 12–14 return to the heart of this ideal king's mission: compassion for the poor and vulnerable, and deep concern for justice. The king is not praised for military might or wealth, but for rescuing the needy and honouring the dignity of every person.⁴³ Verse 14b offers a rare and powerful statement: "precious is their blood in his sight." The true treasure in this psalm is not silver or gold, but the peace and liberation that flow from a just and compassionate reign.

Matthew 2:1–12

The visit of the Magi is one of the most evocative scenes in the nativity story, rich in symbolism and surprise.

The "wise men" or Magi were likely astrologers or scholars from Persia, in the region of modern-day Iran. To Matthew's Jewish readers, they would have been viewed with deep suspicion: foreign, pagan and outside the covenant community. And yet, they are the ones who come seeking truth.⁴⁴

Their journey foreshadows the final commission Jesus gives at the end of Matthew's Gospel: to go and make disciples of all nations. The arrival of these outsiders is a glimpse of the global reach of the good news. Jesus is a gift not confined to one people or place – he is sought by those who are hungry for truth, wherever they come from.⁴⁵ He is, quite literally, the gift that keeps on giving.

Herod stands in stark contrast to both Jesus and the Magi. Where they seek and worship, he plots and clings. Herod is paranoid and possessive, desperate to hold onto power.⁴⁶ The Magi, meanwhile, kneel in reverence and open their treasure chests, willing to part with precious gifts in honour of one they recognise as greater. They seemed to know that earthly treasure is not to be held tightly.⁴⁷ May we too give the gift of Jesus freely and widely.

⁴¹ Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, p. 314.

⁴² Brueggemann, Cousar, Gaventa, Newsome, *Texts for Preaching Year A* pp. 85–86.

⁴³ Weiser, *The Psalms*, p. 504.

⁴⁴ Evans, *Matthew*, p. 51.

⁴⁵ Brueggemann, Cousar, Gaventa, Newsome, *Texts for Preaching Year A* pp. 89–90.

⁴⁶ Evans, *Matthew*, pp. 53–54.

⁴⁷ Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, p. 27.

Questions for discussion

Justice and compassion in leadership

- How does the picture of the ideal king in Psalm 72 challenge our usual ideas about power and leadership?
- In what ways can we reflect this kind of compassionate leadership in our communities today?

The Magi as seekers

The Magi were foreigners, outsiders seeking truth.

- What does their story say about who is invited into God's kingdom?
- What might it mean for us to be open to gifts and truth coming from unexpected places or people?

Giving and sharing

- How might we sometimes hold tightly to "earthly treasure" rather than freely giving and sharing the gift of Jesus?
- How can we cultivate a spirit of generosity like the Magi in our own lives?

Global reach of the gospel

- The Magi's visit points to the gospel's invitation to all nations. How can we live out this global vision in our church or daily life?
- What practical ways can we reach out to those who are on the fringes or might seem 'different' or 'outside' our usual community?

Hands-on activities

Journey of the Magi diorama

Materials: paper, fabric scraps, small boxes or figurines.

Activity: Create a visual scene of the Magi's journey. Include the star, camels, gifts and the stable.

Reflection: Reflect on the journey of seeking and giving.

Gift boxes

Materials: Origami gift box templates, paper, pens.

Activity: Decorate small boxes and fill them with 'gifts' that represent things we can give to others (kindness, time, prayers, service).

Reflection: Talk about how we can give these gifts freely.

Salt dough gifts

Materials: Salt dough, cutters and tools.

Activity: Shape the dough into shapes that express what Jesus means to us. Make a hole at the top. When dry, decorate them, putting ribbon through the hole and place them on display.

Reflection: Notice all the different things that Jesus means to us.

Prayer ideas

Ripple prayer – passing the gift on

Ask people to reflect silently on this question:

“Who has been a gift in your life recently?”

Then ask:

“To whom might God be calling you to pass on love, grace or encouragement this week?”

Invite people to say, aloud or silently:

“Jesus, your love is a gift that never runs out. Help me to keep it moving.”

Conclude with:

“May we be part of your never-ending ripple of grace.”

Breath prayer

Use a breath rhythm like this:

Inhale: “You are the gift...”

Exhale: “...that keeps on giving.

Encourage the group to take a few slow, quiet breaths together. Then close with:

“May we never stop following the light. May we never stop giving what we’ve been given.”

Pathway prayers

Create a simple path on the floor, or use a finger labyrinth to ‘walk and reflect’ on the coming days in your life.

Who are the people you will meet? Where are the places you will go? Ask God to help you be part of the gift that keeps on giving, sharing good news and God’s love wherever you are.

Global prayers

In Europe the Church is continuing to experience the enrichment from Methodists around the world. The Methodist Church in Portugal is planting new churches as Portuguese-speaking migrants arrive with their faith looking for a home. This is the unexpected gift of wise people bringing modern day gold, frankincense and myrrh in new songs, new patterns, new words of worship.

Almighty God,
your Kingdom is one of renewal and love.
May we see the rhythm of your renewal in our churches today
Good news given and received.
We pray with all on the move, bringing gifts from lands afar to new places.
May we give our gifts with open hearts to a new place.
Help us to find people of peace to build community.
We pray for all receiving wise people into congregations and homes.
May we receive the gifts and learn a fresh expression of faith.
Help us to embody your surrounding care for those newly arrived with us.
A renewed people, inspired for your mission.
Amen.

The good news to get across

You are like a treasure chest, filled with gifts waiting to be shared.
Generosity isn't just about giving things; it's about sharing your time, your encouragement, your compassion and your joy. When you freely offer these gifts, you reflect God's love and make the world a richer, brighter place.
So open your treasure chest with courage and kindness, knowing that your gifts can make a real difference in the lives of others.

Ways people can respond

Invite people to hold their gift box in their hand, and pray that God may use them as a gift to other people who want to know God.

Blue Christmas

Bible readings

Psalm 121

Matthew 2:1–12

Songs and hymns

- The First Nowell
- O Holy Night (the middle stanza, which is often missed out, is about the Magi and includes the lines: *In all our trials born to be our friend/He knows our need/To our weakness no stranger*)
- **The Three Kings by Peter Cornelius**
(Please check out this lesser-known carol:
youtu.be/FnpHsLnwg5g?si=uoT64QRNSpu-xXhe)

Christmas can be a very difficult time for people for all kinds of reasons. A 'Blue Christmas' service provides a space for painful emotions to be held and acknowledged rather than dismissed or hidden amidst all the jollity. It offers a space in which people can feel what they feel.

A Blue Christmas service needs to offer good news of hope for the future without minimising the pain that is felt now. It is likely to demand less of participants: music may be performed rather than people being expected to sing along.

Careful thought needs to be given in terms of pastoral care. Prayer and/or listening could be offered at the end of the service for people who want this, and signposting to other services, such as counselling, may be helpful. We can use the message of Gifted to offer good news to people who are struggling.

Background notes

For some people, Christmas itself feels like a gift – a time of joy and beauty – but this isn't true for everyone. For some, Christmas is an unwanted gift that they'd like to throw in the bin, even while everyone around them is in party mode. Some people feel they have to smile gratefully even though they aren't smiling inside.

In Matthew 2 we read about gifts that Jesus received from the magi: gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Precious gold, valuable and highly sought after, then as now. Frankincense and myrrh: sweet, rich-smelling tree resins, very expensive items. There are several Old Testament references associating frankincense and myrrh with joy and celebration yet, traditionally, gold has been understood as marking Jesus's kingship,

frankincense his priesthood, and myrrh his death. In Mark 15.23 Jesus is given wine mixed with myrrh on the cross; in John 19.39 we read that Nicodemus brings myrrh and aloes to anoint the dead body of Jesus. In this service, we take the traditional association of myrrh with Jesus' suffering and death, focusing on the gift of myrrh as we hold before God the suffering in our own lives.

There are three ways in which we might do this, and preachers may wish to offer all three. Firstly, we may be thinking of people we love who have died, and the sweet aroma of myrrh that anointed Jesus' body can help us hold these loved ones in prayer (see below for suggestions for using myrrh essential oil in prayer).

Secondly, we may contemplate the gift of myrrh as a metaphor for the sadness we carry. When we are overwhelmed with sorrow, we can give our sadness to God and – we hope and trust – receive peace, comfort and strength to go on. Preachers and pastors will need to take care here not to offer this as an easy solution for 'fixing' pain – "Just give it to God!" – but rather an invitation to relationship with one who cares.

Finally, and perhaps most profoundly, we notice the presence of sorrow and suffering right there in the nativity tableau, at the heart of a story that is so often told with joy and gladness. And as we notice this, we realise that God knows and sees our sorrows; that there is a place for them, even at Christmas.

Questions

- Have you ever given your sadness to God in prayer? What was it like?
- What difference does it make to see myrrh – a reference to suffering and death – at the heart of the Christmas story?
- Can you think of a time someone has been a gift to you – helped you in some way – during a time of pain or sadness?

Hands-on activities

Materials:

- A variety of blue gift wrap supplies: blue tissue or crepe paper; wrapping paper with a blue background; blue ribbons and gift tags
- Washi tape (the more eco-friendly option) or sellotape
- Scissors
- Christmas ornaments – you could have people donate ones they rarely use or don't need
- Instruction cards so that people can quietly move to this table and participate without waiting for instructions

Activity: People are invited to take a Christmas ornament and wrap it in blue paper. As they wrap, they can think about the sadness or pain they feel, that for them is wrapped around Christmas. (The response activity will give people options for what to do with their wrapped ornament).

Prayer ideas

Get some myrrh essential oil and offer people the opportunity to have a drop on their forehead or hand as part of a time of prayer. Alternatively, for a no-touch option (which some people might prefer), put a drop of myrrh on scraps of cloth and hand them round for people to smell as they pray. [Holland & Barrett](#) and [Neal's Yard](#), among other retailers, sell myrrh.

Creator God,

thank you for the gift of the world you made.

Thank you for the gift of one another.

Thank you that we do not have to struggle through alone,
that you made us for community.

Living Lord Jesus,

whose birth we are here to remember,

thank you for giving us the gift of you –

for coming to be with us

as one of us,

for taking on our humanity and sharing our pain.

Holy Spirit,

thank you for bringing us the gift of God's presence,

turning every heart into a Bethlehem stable

and every moment an opportunity for grace.

Eternal God,

Father, Son and Holy Spirit,

you have given us so much

and we have received so little.

We are sorry for the times we have thrown your gifts away

through selfishness, through thoughtlessness,

or simply because our eyes are full of tears.

Thank you that you keep giving anyway, because you love us.

In Jesus' name we pray,

Amen.

The good news to get across

Even amidst all the rejoicing, God sees and receives your sadness.

Ways people can respond

Give people a few options:

- Leave their wrapped Christmas ornament under the cross, or under your church Christmas tree, as an offering to God, who cares for them and sees their tears.
- Take their wrapped ornament home as a reminder that, for them, joy is wrapped in sadness right now, and that is okay.
- Take their wrapped ornament home and, when they are ready to do so, unwrap it and hang the ornament on their Christmas tree. They might not be ready until next Christmas (or later), and that's okay too.

Carol Service

Bible readings

Carol services appeal to a broad range of people, including many unaffiliated people, and for some people it will be the only church service they attend all year. For this reason, it makes sense to include all the key passages that tell the Christmas story as part of your service.

For example:

- Isaiah 9:2–7
- Luke 1:26–38
- Luke 2:1–7
- Luke 2:8–20*
- Matthew 2:1–12
- John 1:1–14

* We suggest that the sermon focuses on this passage and the background notes refer to these verses.

Songs and hymns

Choose carols that are well known, using tunes and words that are likely to be familiar to unaffiliated people. Traditional is good, as this may connect with people's memories of childhood Christmases, and unaffiliated people can get just as grumpy as church folks about messing with tradition!

For example:

- 202 Hark! the herald-angels sing
- 212 O come all ye faithful
- 217 Silent night
- 213 O little town of Bethlehem
- 214 Once in royal David's city
- 204 In the bleak midwinter

If in doubt, ask unaffiliated friends and family which carols they know.

Background notes

Out of all the services you hold each year, your carol service is the most likely to attract unaffiliated visitors. Lots of people who would not usually attend church love Christmas and enjoy singing carols. Perhaps it brings back memories of Christmases when they were children. Perhaps they enjoy the familiarity of the traditional words and tunes. Perhaps they simply want to enjoy feeling Christmassy in a candlelit church. Whatever the reason they've come, we want them to hear a simple, clear message of good news: that God loves them unconditionally, no strings attached. Ideally this will be no more than 5–10 minutes long, to keep people's attention: it's about quality, not quantity. We suggest that this message focus on the shepherds (Luke 2:8–20).

The shepherds were ordinary people doing a hard, unglamorous job in a dark field when they were visited by the angels.⁴⁸ They reflect a recurrent theme of Luke's Gospel: that people experiencing poverty, marginalisation and disability are on the guest list of the kingdom of God.⁴⁹

Some commentators have traditionally suggested that shepherds were particularly disreputable: this is not necessarily supported by evidence, but the shepherds certainly did not have a high position in society.⁵⁰ Here, then, is an opportunity to help people connect their ordinary – and perhaps, for some, very difficult – lives with God's love in Jesus.

The shepherds are no one special, yet they are the ones who bring Mary and Joseph the message of the angels, giving Mary a gift that she ponders in her heart (Luke 2.19).⁵¹ They declare that the baby Jesus is a gift from God – or rather, the gift of God. The 19th century rabbi, Menachem Mendel of Rymanov, said "Human beings are God's language." We human beings are gifts, just as we are, communicating God's love to one another.

Use the example of the shepherds to help people think about the gifts they give others. Whether it's a text or phone call with a message of encouragement, a practical helping hand, a homemade cake, or the gift of time, they make a difference in other people's lives.⁵² Invite people to notice how God uses them to bless others, as the shepherds blessed Mary and Joseph with the message of the angels. You might want to reference Gary Chapman's *5 Love Languages*® here, to help people think about different ways they might do this: acts of service, gifts, quality time, words of affirmation and physical touch.⁵³

Questions for discussion

Think of a time when someone gave you good news. What was it and how did it feel?

- What's your favourite way of helping others – practical help, kind words, gifts, something else?
- Have you ever had the experience of helping someone and discovering it was just what they needed, at just the right time? What happened?

48 Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, Sacra Pagina Series Volume 3 (1991) Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, p. 52.

49 Fred B. Craddock, *Luke, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (1990), Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, p. 36.

50 Johnson, p. 52.

51 Craddock, p. 35.

52 Harold S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, 20th anniversary edition (2011), London: Pan Books, Kindle edition, p. 2.

53 See: 5lovelanguages.com/learn

Hands-on activities

Carol services aren't always very child-friendly, so if your carol service happens before children's bedtimes, consider having an activity table with some of the options below. Provide some simple written instructions. The activities are based on *The 5 Love Languages*®:

Gift tags

Materials: Plain kraft gift tags, Christmas stencils or washi tape, coloured pens.

Activity: Invite people to design a gift tag to attach to a gift they'll give someone. They can decorate using stencils, washi tape and coloured pens.

Reflection: Encourage people to think about the person who will receive the gift and what makes that person special as they create their tag. How does personalising a gift tag add meaning to giving?

A cuppa with a friend

Materials: Box of paper-wrapped tea bags, kraft paper, washi tape, coloured pens.

Activity: Have people take two tea bags – one for themselves and one for a friend. They wrap the tea bags in kraft paper, decorate the package with washi tape and pens, and write a message like "one for me, one for you".

Reflection: Invite participants to consider the value of sharing simple moments with others. How might this small gesture nurture friendship and connection?

Thank you cards

Materials: Pack of the Methodist Church's thank you cards, pens.

Activity: Encourage people to write a thank you card to someone for a small act of kindness they've experienced.

Reflection: Ask people to reflect on the impact of gratitude in relationships. How does expressing thanks affect both the giver and the receiver?

Novelty gift vouchers

Materials: Printed blank vouchers (simple templates), pens.

Activity: Invite people to think of helpful things they could do for someone and write them on the vouchers – for example, doing the washing up, going to the shops, or helping fix something.

Reflection: Encourage participants to consider acts of service as meaningful gifts. How can offering our time or skills be a powerful way to show care?

Kind hands

Materials: Paper, pens, scissors.

Activity: Have people draw around their hands on paper and cut out the shapes. On each finger, they write something they could do for someone who appreciates physical touch, such as shaking hands, a gentle hand on the shoulder, a high five, or a hug (with mutual consent).

Reflection: Invite reflection on the ways physical touch can communicate kindness and support. How do small gestures of touch express love and reassurance?

Prayer ideas

Give everyone a thank you card and pen. Invite people to think of someone they would like to bless, as the shepherds blessed Mary and Joseph by bringing the news of the visit of the angels. Have them write a simple message of thanks: for something the person has done for them or something they appreciate about who the person is.

The good news to get across

God wants to give others hope through your words and actions.

Ways people can respond

Encourage people not simply to write a card to someone but to take it away and give or send it to the person.



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