

DON'T BE AFRAID



Worship Resource Pack

**Lots of us are afraid, for lots of good reasons.
But there are glimmers of goodness and love all around, like feathers:
light and easily missed, scattered around us. Will you notice them?**

Come and experience awe and wonder with us this Christmas.

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 the Methodist Church's 2026 Christmas theme.

From Advent to Christmas, *Don't Be Afraid* follows a simple but powerful journey. Each week names a different way fear shows up, and a different way God meets us within it.

- During Advent, we begin by learning to notice hope, even when things feel uncertain or unsettled. We discover that God is already at work, beginning something new, often in hidden or overlooked places. As the story unfolds, we are reminded that God is closer than we think, present before we recognise it. We see that God's presence can interrupt our plans, not to unsettle us for its own sake, but to open new possibilities.
- At Christmas, we hear the heart of the good news: God comes near in Jesus, not with force, but with vulnerability and love.
- Beyond Christmas, the journey continues as we learn to trust that God stays with us over time, makes a home among us, and gently guides us step by step.

This is not a journey where fear suddenly disappears. Instead, it is a journey where fear is named honestly, met by God's presence, and slowly replaced with trust, attention and hope.

Inside this pack, you'll find ideas for eight worship services, running from the start of Advent (Sunday 29 November) through to Epiphany. Christmas Day falls on a Friday 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.

An accompanying small group guide is also available, designed to follow the same themes and help people explore them in a more conversational way.

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 that tells us why we don't need to be afraid.
Scripture passages	Taken from the lectionary. Scripture quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition.
Songs and hymns	Some ideas from <i>Singing the Faith</i> that match the weekly theme. You may wish to include music from a range of cultural traditions represented in your community.
Opening liturgy	To accompany the lighting of candles throughout Advent, continuing into Christmas. Each week includes a simple object that can be placed at the front of the worship space, helping to embody the theme visually.
Background notes	Short contextual information for each specific service, exploring how the theme connects to the Bible passages.
Questions for discussion	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.
Interactive activities	Fun, intergenerational activities to help make your services pop, using materials that are simple, low-cost or already available in your setting. More activities and ideas for children and young people can be found in the intergenerational resource, at methodist.org.uk/ChristmasResources
Prayer ideas	Interactive ways to connect with God.
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	Simple, non-threatening invitations to notice how fear shows up, and to try small, practical steps towards trust and freedom.

Making worship more just, diverse and inclusive

This resource is designed to be used in a wide range of contexts, and we recognise that every worshipping community reflects a rich diversity of backgrounds, identities and experiences. Worship leaders are encouraged to use language that is welcoming and inclusive, drawing on the breadth of biblical imagery for God and taking care to avoid assumptions about those present. Take care to use language and examples that are welcoming to people of all identities, including LGBTQ+ people. For further guidance, you can refer to the Church's Inclusive Language Guide at methodist.org.uk/InclusiveLanguage

The material offered here is intentionally flexible; please adapt activities, prayers and delivery so that everyone can participate fully, whatever their age, ability or circumstance. Where activities involve movement, making or interaction, ensure alternative ways of taking part are available. All activities should be offered sensitively and in line with local safeguarding guidance, with participation always optional.

Worship leaders are encouraged to consider accessibility in their context – for example:

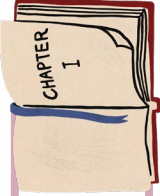
- offering spoken descriptions of visual elements
- providing large print or digital copies
- adapting activities so everyone can participate (eg seated alternatives, sensory options)
- ensuring participation does not depend on mobility, dexterity or sight.

Advent and Christmas into Lent and Easter

Throughout this resource, we speak of God's presence already at work in the world. During Advent and Christmas, we focus especially on how that presence is made known in a new way in Jesus Christ.

Advent and Christmas do not resolve fear once and for all. They open a story that will continue to unfold. What begins here, with hope glimpsed, nearness discovered, interruption welcomed, and presence received, will be tested, deepened and reshaped as the journey moves on through Lent and Easter.

The *Don't Be Afraid* series continues beyond Christmas, tracing how God stays present not only in expectation and arrival, but also in wilderness, struggle, suffering and resurrection life. This season invites us to begin that journey attentively, trusting that the God who comes near will not withdraw when the story becomes harder and that fear, however real, will not have the last word.

Date	Weekly theme	Old Testament	Gospel	Object
29 Nov	Advent 1 Hope is hiding in plain sight	Isaiah 64:1–9	Mark 13:24–37	
6 Dec	Advent 2 A new chapter is beginning	Isaiah 40:1–11	Mark 1:1–8	
13 Dec	Advent 3 God is nearer than we think	Isaiah 61:1–4, 8–11	John 1:6–8, 19–38	
20 Dec	Advent 4 God interrupts for good reasons	2 Samuel 7:1–11, 16	Luke 1:26–38	
25 Dec	Christmas Day Jesus is here	Isaiah 62:6–12	Luke 2:1–20	
27 Dec	Christmas 1 Good things take time	Isaiah 61:10 – 62:3	Luke 2:22–40	
3 Jan	Christmas 2 God has made a home among us	Jeremiah 31:7–14	John 1:10–18	
6 Jan	Epiphany God leaves traces to guide us	Isaiah 60:1–6	Matthew 2:1–12	

ADVENT 1

29 November 2026



Don't be afraid
Hope is hiding
in plain sight



Bible readings

Isaiah 64:1–9

A prayer from a people who feel lost and shaken, asking God to come close again and reshape them with mercy rather than judgement.

Mark 13:24–37

Jesus speaks of upheaval and uncertainty, calling his followers not to panic but to stay awake and attentive to the signs of God's coming future.

Songs and hymns

- 169 Come, thou long-expected Jesus
- 173 Into the darkness of this world
- 708 O God of hope, your prophets spoke
- 632 I've had questions without answers
- 722 When mountains that we thought secure
- 625 Deep in the darkness a starlight is gleaming
- 780 Stay with me
- 526 Lord of all hopefulness,
Lord of all joy

Opening liturgy

Object: a branch with buds



This might be tricky at this time of year! You could try bringing a branch from a tree (forsythia, willow, cherry, apple etc) indoors and placing the cut end in water for two weeks before the service. This might encourage it to bud early. But don't worry too much, any branch will make the point.

As Advent begins, we gather in a season of waiting.

The days are short, the trees stand bare, and the future can feel uncertain.

Don't be afraid:

hope is hiding in plain sight.

Jesus tells us not to be afraid, but to stay awake, to notice what is quietly growing even when it is hard to see.

Don't be afraid:

hope is hiding in plain sight.

In the midst of winter and worry, God is already at work, holding the future open before us.

Don't be afraid:

hope is hiding in plain sight.

As we begin this Advent journey together –

Don't be afraid:

hope is hiding in plain sight.

Background notes

The sun will be darkened...

The world can often feel chaotic and frightening. Jesus acknowledges this honestly. In Mark 13:24–25 he uses vivid, poetic language to describe a future marked by upheaval and disorder:

**“the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light,
and the stars will be falling from heaven,
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.”**

This imagery echoes the prophets (Amos 5:20, Jeremiah 4:23) and resembles a reversal of the creation story in Genesis. It is anti-creation – a world moving backwards, away from flourishing and towards fragmentation. Scripture is clear that God is not indifferent to this: God is committed to setting creation right.

From the fig tree learn its lesson...

Jesus gives his listeners a small everyday image: “From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near.” (Mark 13:28) Just as the fig tree offers advance notice of a new season, God plants small signs of restoration throughout the world.

Signs of hope start quietly. They aren’t always dramatic, but they are unmistakable if you pay attention.

Scripture promises that one day God will renew all things and heal all that is broken. That after death comes resurrection. Advent invites us to watch for these glimpses: the early leaves of God’s future growing in the present.

Spinoza once wrote, “There is no hope unmingled with fear, and no fear unmingled with hope.” Advent holds these two together. We do not deny the darkness, but we also do not let the darkness tell the whole story.

Where to look for hope

Even in times of disaster or despair, hope is not absent. It often hides in plain sight. For example:

- When tragedy strikes, look for those who rush to help.
- When community life frays, notice the neighbour who continues to check in.
- When the world feels bitter or divided, pay attention to the small acts of generosity that build bridges.
- When your own life feels stuck in winter, look for the tiny signs of life God is growing at the edges.

These are not just sentimental comforts. They are indicators that God’s restoring work is already underway.

Advent's invitation

Advent does not ask us to pretend everything is fine. It asks us to stay awake, to notice, to expect. In a world that feels unsettled, Jesus invites us to look for the tender leaves on the branches. Hope is here. It may be small, but it is real. And it is growing.

Don't be afraid.

Hope is hiding in plain sight.

Questions for discussion

- * Where do you find yourself feeling most anxious or unsettled at the moment?
- * What makes hope hard to notice in this season of the year?
- * Can you name a small sign of hope you have noticed recently, even if it felt easy to overlook?

Interactive activities

Angel treasure hunt

Hide pictures of angels (or small wooden angels) around the worship space and invite everyone to see how many they can find.

When everyone has had a chance to look, ask:

- How did you feel when you were invited to take part in the treasure hunt?
- How did you feel when you found an angel?
- If you did not find one, how did that feel?

Invite everyone to continue the angel treasure hunt throughout Advent. As they go about their daily lives, encourage them to look out for images, decorations, songs, stories or other reminders of angels in their neighbourhood and beyond. How many examples can they spot each day or each week?

Signs of hope pass-the-parcel

Prepare a multi-layered pass-the-parcel, with a bar of Tony's Chocolonely (or other Fairtrade chocolate bar) at the centre as the prize.

Rather than including forfeits between the layers, invite each person who unwraps a layer to share a recent sign of hope that they have seen, experienced or heard about. This could be a kind action, an encouraging story, a moment of joy, or something that has helped them feel hopeful.

When the final layer is unwrapped, share the chocolate with the group or present it to the winner.

For additional guidance and ideas on leading this activity, download the intergenerational resource at methodist.org.uk/ChristmasResources

Prayer idea



Pass-the-parcel prayer



Gather the signs of hope that have emerged through the activity and invite everyone to join in a simple prayer using their hands as a reminder of God's care for the world, for others and for ourselves.

Lift your hands upwards

Thank God for the signs of hope that have been shared today. Pray for hope, peace and renewal throughout the world.

Hold your hands out in front of you

Say sorry for the times when we have been unwilling to share, slow to show generosity, or reluctant to help those in need. Pray for your local community and for all who are struggling or afraid.

Place your hands on your heart

Pray for your own hopes, concerns and aspirations. Ask for God's blessing, comfort and courage, and remember all those who are in need of God's love and care.

Close by thanking God for being with us in every season, and for the hope we find in God's promises.

**The
good news
to get across**

**Don't be afraid.
Hope is hiding in plain sight.**

Ways people can respond

This week, notice small signs of hope.

Each day, take a few moments to notice something small that feels hopeful.

- It might be something you see, hear or experience.
- Keep it simple – it doesn't need to be significant or dramatic.
- You could write it down or just pause and give thanks.

Why it helps

Jesus speaks of watching for signs, even when the world feels uncertain or unsettled. This practice helps us train our attention away from fear's loud voice, and towards the quieter signs of hope. As we notice more, we begin to see that God is already at work, even when it isn't obvious.

ADVENT 2

6 December 2026



Don't be afraid
A new chapter
is beginning



Bible readings

Isaiah 40:1–11

God speaks words of comfort to people in exile, promising restoration and a future shaped by care, strength and hope.

Mark 1:1–8

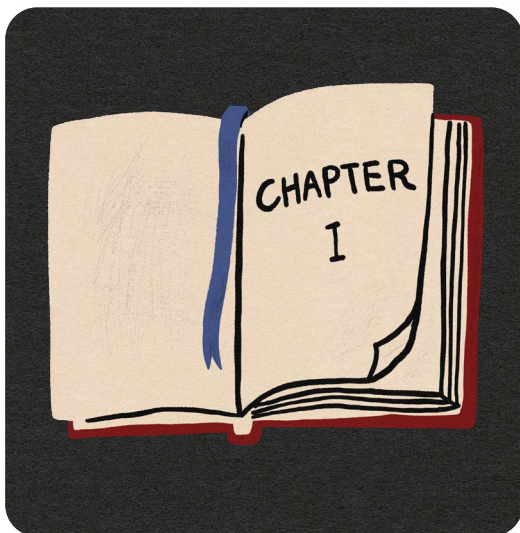
The beginning of the Gospel announces a new start, with John the Baptist preparing the way for God's long-promised renewal.

Songs and hymns

- 182** On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry
- 183** Praise to the God who clears the way
- 738** There is a new heaven; there is a new earth
- 406** Have you heard the good news?
- 483** We are marching in the light of God
- 174** Light a candle in a darkened place
- 776** In the Lord I'll be ever thankful
- 188** There's a light upon the mountains

Opening liturgy

Object: a book opened to the first page



As Advent continues, we gather as people still waiting.

The days press on, the nights draw in, and it can feel as though little is changing.

Don't be afraid:

God is on the move.

We hear again the stories of beginnings, of God stirring, of the world shifting in ways that are not yet obvious but already underway.

Don't be afraid:

God is on the move.

In places that seem quiet, and moments that seem delayed, your purposes are unfolding ahead of us.

Don't be afraid:

God is on the move.

As we listen, watch and wait together –

Don't be afraid:

God is on the move.

Background notes

The beginning of the good news

Mark opens his Gospel with a simple but loaded sentence:

“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ.”

The first word, *archē* – “beginning” – consciously echoes Genesis 1. Mark wants us to hear an announcement of new creation. Something fresh and world-changing is starting. A new heaven and a new earth are beginning to break through.

The third word is *euangelion*, “good news”. Today we use related words like ‘evangelism’ in church contexts, but in the first century the term had a sharply political meaning. When Rome won a military victory, heralds – evangelists – were sent across the empire to proclaim the good news: you now belong to Rome.

Scholar Tat-Siong Benny Liew¹ warns that by using this language, Mark does not stand at a safe distance from empire. Instead, Mark risks falling into a kind of colonial mimicry, repeating imperial ways of speaking even as he tries to challenge them. Jesus is announced using terms normally reserved for emperors, and this creates tension. On the one hand, Mark proclaims a radically different kind of kingdom, shaped by justice, mercy and restoration rather than domination. On the other hand, the very language used to announce this kingdom carries the weight and habits of imperial rule.

Advent captures that same holy anticipation. Something is about to happen. God is on the move.

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness

Mark tells us:

“So John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”

The wilderness in Scripture is not a peaceful retreat centre. It symbolises the place where forces hostile to God’s purposes seem strongest – a landscape shaped by threat, vulnerability and spiritual contest.

And yet the wilderness is exactly where John is sent. He stands in the heart of opposition, announcing forgiveness, turning people back towards God, preparing the way for renewal.

Jesus will enter the wilderness too as his ministry begins; we will revisit that journey during Lent next year. But already Mark shows us that God’s new creation doesn’t wait for perfect conditions. It takes root in the world’s most contested spaces.

After me comes the one more powerful than I

John points beyond himself. John knows his role: vital, courageous, but partial. His ministry is a foretaste, a first crack of light before dawn. He steps into the wilderness because he trusts what God will do next. He knows which story will win.

¹ Tat-Siong Benny Liew, *Tyranny, Boundary, and Might: Colonial Mimicry in Mark’s Gospel*, ed RS Sugirtharajah (The Postcolonial Biblical Reader, 2006), p. 206–216

Advent's invitation

Advent is not simply a countdown to Christmas. It is a season of alertness and courage. God is on the move. Not in a distant, abstract way, but here, in the wilderness places of our own lives and communities.

Where hostility or injustice seem strong, God is already at work. Where things feel stuck or resistant to change, God is preparing a new beginning. Where fear whispers that nothing can improve, the Gospel quietly counters: This is just the beginning of the good news.

Don't be afraid.

God is on the move.

Questions for discussion

- * Where in your life does it feel as though things are stuck or going nowhere?
- * How do you usually recognise that something new is beginning?
- * How can you prepare for God's movement rather than controlling it?

Interactive activities

Journey backpack

Gather a selection of everyday items you might take on a day trip, or use pictures of those items instead. Hide them around the space or display them ready to be discovered.

Ask the group:

- What would you choose to take in your backpack for a day out?

Invite volunteers to find an item or picture and explain why they think it would be useful. (See the [intergenerational resource](#) for suggested items and additional guidance.)

As each item is shared, reflect on how different things help us in different situations and challenges. Some keep us safe, some help us find our way, and some bring comfort or encouragement.

Then ask:

- What helps us on our journey of faith?
- What do we need when life becomes difficult or uncertain?
- How might we recognise that God is travelling alongside us?
- Who are the people, practices or experiences that help us grow closer to God?

Take time to share ideas together and reflect on the ways God equips us for the journey ahead.

Stuck

*Stuck*² by Oliver Jeffers is a delightful story about a problem that becomes more and more complicated as one attempt after another fails to solve it. You can read from a copy of the book or find a reading of the story online.

After sharing the story, invite some conversation:

- Have you ever had a problem that seemed impossible to solve?
- What happens when our efforts to fix things do not work?
- Why do we sometimes keep trying the same approach, even when it is not helping?

Then encourage a time of personal reflection:

- Think about an area of your life where you feel stuck, frustrated or unable to move forwards.
- What have you been relying on to solve the problem?
- Are there things you have tried again and again without success?
- What might it mean to place the situation in God's hands?

As Advent invites us to slow down and pay attention to God's presence, consider how you might make space for God to bring new perspective, fresh hope or unexpected possibilities. What might God be gently shaking loose so something new can begin?

2 Oliver Jeffers, *Stuck* (London, HarperCollins, 2012)

Prayer ideas



Journey backpack prayer

Use the items gathered for the activity as prompts for prayer. Invite different people to hold or display each item as you pray together.

Map or compass

Loving God, thank you for guiding us on our journey of faith. Help us to follow your path, make wise choices, and trust you when the way ahead is unclear.

Packed lunch

Generous God, we pray for all who do not have enough to eat. Help us to share what we have and work for a world where everyone has access to the food and support they need.

You might also use other items from the backpack, for example:



Water bottle

Thank you, God, for all that refreshes and sustains us. Be close to those who are tired, overwhelmed or struggling today.

Torch

Shine your light into places of fear, uncertainty and sadness. Help us to notice your presence and follow your light.

Warm coat

We pray for those who feel vulnerable or alone. Surround them with your love and help us to show kindness and care to others.

Close by thanking God for all the ways he equips us for the journey and walks alongside us each day.

Labyrinth

Provide a printed copy of the labyrinth below for each person, or invite everyone to trace the shape of a labyrinth with a finger on their hand or leg. This can be a particularly helpful way for parents and carers to pray with younger children.

Explain that the labyrinth is not a maze to be solved but a path to follow slowly and prayerfully.

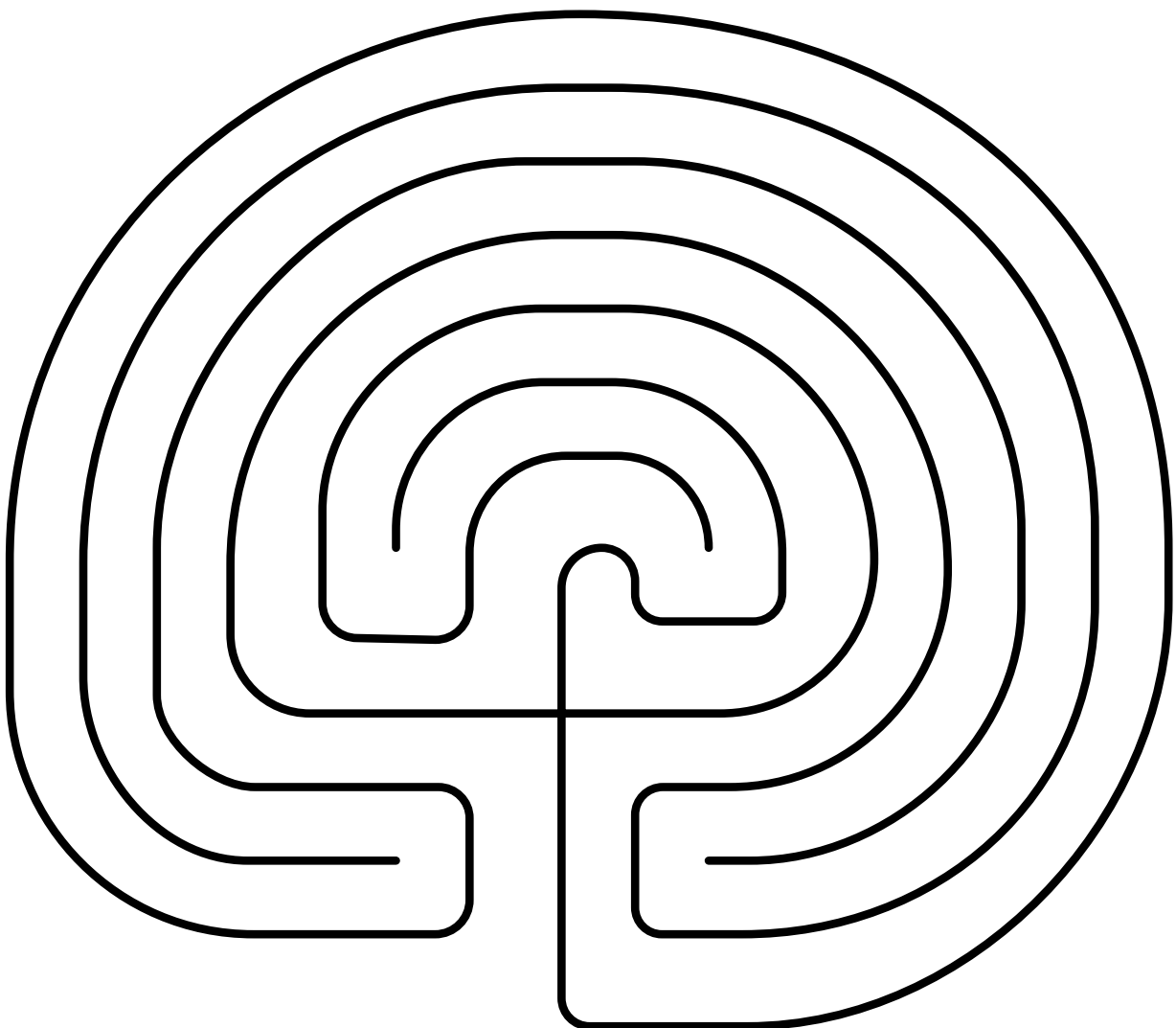
As participants trace the path, invite them to reflect on these questions:

- “Do not be afraid.” What fears, worries or concerns am I carrying today?

- “God is on the move.” Where might God be present in the midst of those fears?
- How is God on the move in my life?
- Where am I noticing signs of change, growth, hope or new possibilities?

Encourage everyone to move slowly along the path, pausing when they need to. As they reach the centre, invite them to rest for a moment in God’s presence and bring their prayers.

As they trace their way back out, encourage them to consider how God might be calling them to move forwards with courage, hope and trust this Advent.





The good news to get across

**Don't be afraid.
God is on the move.**

Ways people can respond

This week, make a small start

Each day, choose one small thing to begin or prepare.

- It might be a task, a conversation, or a change you've been putting off.
- Keep it realistic and manageable.
- Don't wait for the perfect moment, just begin.

Why it helps

John the Baptist prepares the way in the wilderness, not in perfect conditions. This practice reminds us that new beginnings rarely feel tidy or complete. Taking a small step helps us move beyond fear and to trust that God is already beginning something new.

ADVENT 3

13 December 2026



Don't be afraid
God is nearer
than we think



Bible readings

Isaiah 61:1–4, 8–11

God proclaims good news to the broken and forgotten, promising healing, justice and the gradual rebuilding of what has been lost.

John 1:6–8, 19–38

John the Baptist testifies that the one people are waiting for is already among them, even if they do not yet recognise him.

Songs and hymns

- | | |
|-----|---|
| 25 | God is here! As we his people |
| 53 | How shall I sing that majesty? |
| 172 | Hills of the north, rejoice |
| 101 | Before the world began |
| 702 | I will speak out for those who have no voices |
| 570 | As we gather, Father, seal us |
| 234 | Behold the lamb of God |
| 457 | Author of faith, eternal Word |

Opening liturgy

Object: A feather



As Advent deepens, we gather still waiting. The weeks are busy, the noise is constant, and it can be hard to notice what truly matters.

Don't be afraid:
God is nearer than we realise.

John speaks of one already among the people,
present but not yet recognised,
the one we come to know in Jesus.

Don't be afraid:
God is nearer than we realise.

We are not called to search harder
or strain to find you,
but to pay attention
to what is already beginning to be revealed.

Don't be afraid:
God is nearer than we realise.

In moments that feel light or
easily overlooked,
in signs that seem small or fragile,
your presence draws near to us
and invites us to notice.

Don't be afraid:
God is nearer than we realise.

As we pause, listen and rejoice together –

Don't be afraid:
God is nearer than we realise.

Background notes

Among you stands one whom you do not know

This is not a distant promise offered for some undefined future. It speaks of what God is already doing, even in places marked by grief and failure, where new life is beginning to take shape.

There are times when life feels thin and disconnected, when meaning seems harder to locate and nothing quite settles. We look for something solid or hopeful, and it can feel as though it never quite arrives. John the Baptist speaks into that experience with a surprising claim: the one people are waiting for is already among them, though not yet recognised.

John tells the crowds that the one they are waiting for is not only coming in the future. He is already standing among them, unrecognised and unseen: the one we come to know in Jesus Christ. God's presence is not absent or delayed, but already active and drawing near, even before people are aware of it or able to name it.

This is both unsettling and deeply reassuring. It means we do not have to summon God's attention or create the right conditions for God to act. Instead, we are invited to notice, to recognise and to trust that God is nearer than we realise.

I myself did not know him

In John's Gospel, the word "know" carries the sense of perception and recognition, not just information. The tragedy John names is not that God is absent, but that God is unnoticed.

That theme runs through Advent. The danger is not that God will fail to come, but that we will look straight past the ways God is already moving; quietly, gently, without spectacle. Fear often tells us that if we cannot see God clearly, God must be far away. Advent counters that fear with a deeper truth: God's presence does not depend on our awareness.

They shall build up the ancient ruins

Isaiah 61 speaks to people who feel worn down by loss, displacement and disappointment. Their cities are in ruins; their confidence is fragile. Yet God declares that restoration is already beginning: good news for the oppressed, healing for the broken-hearted, rebuilding for what has long been destroyed.

For those who feel overlooked, forgotten or left behind, this is good news indeed.

God comes with purpose

God's presence is never passive. The Spirit rests, presses and propels; not only comforting, but commissioning. Isaiah's vision of renewal is inseparable from justice, restoration and joy shared in community.

When God draws near, God also invites people to join in the work of healing the world. Nearness leads to sending; comfort leads to calling.

Advent's invitation

Advent does not ask us to strain our eyes in fear, worrying that God might not turn up. It invites us to slow down, pay attention, and trust that God is already closer than we imagine.

When God feels hidden, God is still present. When certainty is missing, hope remains. When fear whispers that we are alone, Advent speaks back: God is already at work, and we are learning to recognise that presence.

Don't be afraid.

God is nearer than we realise.

Questions for discussion

- * What makes it difficult to notice God's presence in the middle of busy or noisy weeks?
- * John the Baptist points to someone already among the people. Where might God already be at work around you?
- * How do you sense the presence of God?

Interactive activities

Notice God's presence Jenga

Before the session, add coloured markers to the Jenga blocks that will be hidden when the tower is built.

Build the tower and invite people to take turns removing a brick in the usual Jenga way. As each brick is removed, ask the player to respond to the prompt linked to its colour.

Colour 1: Where have you noticed God at work this week?

Encourage participants to think about moments when they have experienced or witnessed love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity or other signs of God's presence.

Colour 2: Share something you wonder about God, faith or the Bible.

Make space for honest curiosity and reflection. Remind everyone that these are questions to wonder about together, not questions that need immediate answers. The aim is to explore, listen and reflect.

Colour 3: Share a way you have helped grow God's Kingdom.

Invite people to tell a positive story about a time they have shown or received kindness, forgiveness, mercy, generosity or love. Encourage them not to be shy about sharing good news and celebrating the ways God is at work through everyday actions.

After several turns, reflect together on what has been shared. You might ask:

- What have we learned about God's presence in our lives?
- What surprised us?
- How can we become more aware of God at work around us?
- How can we join in with what God is already doing?

Remind everyone that each of us has a part to play in God's Kingdom. Through our questions, our prayers and our actions, we can share God's love with the world around us.

For additional ideas and variations on this activity, see the [intergenerational resource](#).

Prayer ideas



God builds lasting hope

Invite everyone to take a sticky note and a pen. Rebuild the Jenga tower and place it where everyone can see it.

Ask each person to write or draw a hope they have for themselves, their family, the church or the wider world.

As people finish, invite them to come forward and stick their notes onto the Jenga tower.

Watching for God's movement

Begin with a time of prayer, focusing on God's movement in the world, in our local communities and in the life of the church.

To help everyone join in physically, invite them to gently march or stamp their feet to the rhythm of each "Amen":

left, right, left, right, A-men, A-men.

This simple action can remind us that God is always moving and inviting us to join in with God's work.

Footprints



Give everyone a paper footprint and a pen.

Invite people to spend a few moments reflecting on the question:

- How can I prepare for and take part in God's movement this Advent?

Ask participants to write or draw a response on their footprint. This might be a prayer, an action, a new habit, or a way of showing God's love to others.

When everyone is ready, invite them to place their footprints together in the centre of the space, creating a pathway of prayer. As the pathway grows, reflect on the many different ways God calls people to follow him and share hope in the world.

Closing prayer

Jesus, help us to walk where you lead.

Open our eyes to see where you are already at work.

Give us courage to follow your path of hope and to join in with all that you are doing in the world.

Amen.



**The
good news
to get across**

**Don't be afraid.
God is nearer than we think.**

Ways people can respond

This week, notice nearness

Take a few moments each day to pause and become aware of your surroundings.

- Notice people, places and moments you might usually rush past.
- Ask quietly: "Where might God be present here?"

Why it helps

John points to God already present among the people, even though many do not recognise it. This practice slows us down and helps us become more attentive. Often the challenge is not that God is absent, but that we are distracted.

ADVENT 4

20 December 2026

* Don't be afraid
God interrupts
for good reasons



Bible readings

2 Samuel 7:1–11, 16

God interrupts David's plans with a promise that it is God, not human ambition, that shapes lasting hope for the future.

Luke 1:26–38

Mary's life is unexpectedly interrupted by God's call, and she responds with trust despite fear, uncertainty and upheaval.

Songs and hymns

- 186 Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord!
- 552 Here am I, Lord
- 546 Behold the servant of the Lord!
- 161 Speak, O Lord, as we come to You
- 555 Jesus, all for Jesus
- 449 Lord of creation, to you be all praise!

Opening liturgy

Object: a bell



As Advent draws near to its end, we gather, still waiting.
Plans are forming, expectations are set,
and we think we know what the days ahead will hold.

Don't be afraid:
God interrupts for good reasons.

The story tells us of lives interrupted,
of ordinary plans unsettled,
of God breaking in where least expected.

Don't be afraid:
God interrupts for good reasons.

Your interruptions are not to confuse or control, but to open new possibilities,
and to make room for what we could not have imagined.

Don't be afraid:
God interrupts for good reasons.

As we make space for your unexpected arrival –

Don't be afraid:
God interrupts for good reasons.

Background notes

Do not be afraid, Mary

Luke tells Mary's story using a pattern that appears again and again in the Hebrew Scriptures. A messenger arrives. Confusion follows. A message is delivered. Questions are raised. Reassurance is offered, along with a sign. The structure is familiar, but the impact is anything but calm.

Mary is not presented as serene or composed. She is greatly disturbed by what is said to her. God's presence does not arrive as a gentle affirmation of her existing plans, but as an interruption that unsettles her. Fear, here, is not a failure of faith. It is a human response to sudden change.

Greetings, favoured one

The angel greets Mary with surprising words: "Greetings, favoured one." Both "greeting" and "favour" share the same root: grace. Before Mary agrees to anything, before she understands what is being asked, grace is already given.

This matters. God's approach does not depend on Mary's readiness, courage or clarity. God does not wait for perfect conditions. Grace comes first, and fear is met with blessing rather than judgement.

The throne of his ancestor David

The promise the angel makes is not detached from history. The child Mary will bear is firmly rooted in the long, unfinished story of God's people. Luke echoes God's ancient promise to David: a kingdom grounded in human life, shaped by time, inheritance and community.

Jesus will belong fully to the human story, not floating above it or bypassing its complexity. God chooses to work within ordinary lives, with all their risk and fragility. That choice does not remove fear, but it gives fear a context.

The child to be born will be holy

At the same time, Luke holds another truth alongside this. The child's birth will come through the creative power of God's Spirit. The language deliberately recalls the opening of Genesis, when God's Spirit moved over chaos and brought life into being.

This is not simply continuity with the past. It is new creation. God is starting something that will change how the world understands power, presence and hope. When God creates anew, the old certainties rarely survive untouched.

Let it be

Mary's final response is not confident triumph but trust: "Let it be." She does not pretend to know how things will unfold. She does not deny the cost or complexity of what lies ahead. She places herself in God's hands anyway.

This is not fearlessness. It is courage shaped by trust. Mary's yes shows that fear does not have to disappear before faith can begin.

Advent's invitation

Life is often turned upside down without warning. Plans unravel. Futures shift. Fear naturally follows. Luke's story does not promise protection from disruption, but it does offer reassurance within it.

God is not absent when everything feels unsettled. Sometimes, upheaval is the place where new creation begins.

Don't be afraid.

God interrupts for good reasons.

Questions for discussion

- * How do you usually respond when plans are disrupted or interrupted?
- * Can you think of a time when an interruption later turned out to matter more than the original plan?
- * What fears surface for you when God's call unsettles what feels settled?

Interactive activities

Intergenerational group/family jigsaw

This intergenerational small-group activity invites each group to complete a jigsaw puzzle. Before the activity, remove a few pieces from each puzzle.

As groups begin to realise their puzzle is incomplete, provide the missing pieces and invite them to finish the picture.

Reflect together:

- What was it like trying to complete an incomplete puzzle?
- How did it feel when the missing pieces arrived?
- Have you ever felt interrupted or redirected by God?

Invite groups to offer prayers together before gathering back as a whole congregation. For additional ideas and variations on this activity, see the [intergenerational resource](#).

Being interrupted

Depending on the size of the group, prepare two or more copies of a simple colouring sheet on clipboards, along with felt-tip pens. You will also need a bell, whistle or other object that makes sounds.

Invite a volunteer to begin colouring. After a minute or so, sound the bell and interrupt them. They must hand the picture to someone else, who continues with a new instruction, such as:

- Use your non-dominant hand.
- Two people must hold the pen together.
- Colour with your eyes closed.

Repeat two or three times, introducing a new instruction each time. When finished, display and admire the artworks.

Reflect together:

- How did it feel to be interrupted?
- What difference did the interruptions make?
- What unexpected things came from them?

Sometimes God's interruptions can lead us to new possibilities. We do not need to be afraid when plans change, because God can be at work in the unexpected.

Prayer ideas

Arm prayers

Invite everyone to use simple actions as they pray:

Give yourself a hug

Pray for people who need to know God's comfort, love and presence.

Hold your hands out in front of you

Pray for your hopes for Christmas and for the coming of Christ's peace in the world.

Lift a fist in the air, as if celebrating a goal

Pray about a way you want to say "yes" to God, following Mary's example of faith and trust.

Bubble prayers

Invite a volunteer to blow some bubbles and watch them drift around the room.

Talk about how bubbles do not always travel in the direction we expect. In a similar way, Mary did not expect God's call to become the mother of Jesus.

As bubbles are blown, offer simple prayers:

- for people whose plans have been unexpectedly interrupted
- for people facing important decisions
- for people living with uncertainty or unexpected change.

As the bubbles float away, remember that God is present with us in every surprise, challenge and new opportunity.



The good news to get across

**Don't be afraid.
God interrupts for
good reasons.**

Ways people can respond

This week, make space for interruption

Each day, notice when something unexpected disrupts your plans.

Instead of reacting immediately, pause.

Take a breath before responding.

Ask: "What might this moment be inviting?"

Why it helps

Mary's life is interrupted by God in an unexpected way. This practice helps us respond to disruption differently; not just with frustration, but with curiosity and openness. Sometimes what we resist may hold something important.

CHRISTMAS DAY

25 December 2026



Don't be afraid
Jesus is here



Bible readings

Isaiah 62:6–12

God promises restoration and joy for a weary people, declaring that salvation has come and is worth celebrating.

Luke 2:1–20

The birth of Jesus is announced not to the powerful but to ordinary shepherds, revealing God's glory through vulnerability and closeness.

Songs and hymns

190–222 Christmas hymns and carols

Opening liturgy

Object: a model of Jesus
in a manger



Today we gather not to wait,
but to welcome.

The long night has passed,
and God has come near.

Don't be afraid:

Jesus is here.

The story tells us of a child born,
of heaven touching earth,
of God choosing closeness
over distance.

Don't be afraid:

Jesus is here.

Not arriving in power or display,
but in vulnerability and need,
God comes to dwell among us.

Don't be afraid:

Jesus is here.

As we celebrate this good news together –

Don't be afraid:

Jesus is here.

Background notes

There were shepherds living in the fields

Luke locates the birth of Jesus in the middle of ordinary life. Shepherds are out in the fields, doing their work, keeping watch through the night. This is not a scene of quiet reverence or fragile calm. Shepherds were tough, resilient people, used to danger, exhaustion and exposure. They were not afraid of the dark, the cold or the risks of the wilderness. Fear was not their default setting.

Nothing in the story suggests they were anxious or waiting for something to happen. Until it does.

Do not be afraid

When the angel of the Lord appears, Luke says the shepherds are terrified. Their fear does not come from weakness or vulnerability. It comes from encounter. The glory of God interrupts the night, and suddenly the world feels larger, brighter and far less manageable.

This matters. The angel's words – "Don't be afraid" – are not spoken because the shepherds are timid or fragile. They are spoken because God has drawn near. Fear here is a response to holiness, not to threat.

Good news of great joy

The message the angel brings is not addressed to kings, officials or religious leaders. It is entrusted to shepherds, people accustomed to being overlooked and underestimated. They are told that a saviour has been born, and they are given a sign that is as surprising as it is ordinary: a baby, wrapped in cloth, lying in a feeding trough.

God does not announce this birth with grandeur or protection. God announces it with vulnerability. The presence that interrupts their fear is not overpowering force, but a child.

The child laying in the manger

At Christmas, God does not stay at a distance. God comes close – close enough to be held, fed and depended upon. The birth of Jesus is not a demonstration of control, but of commitment. God enters the world not through strength, but through presence.

This is why the instruction not to be afraid matters so much. The good news is not just that something joyful has happened, but that God is now with us in a new way, within reach, within life as it is.

The shepherds returned

Once the angels have gone, the shepherds act. They go to see what has been promised. They do not fully understand what they will find, but they move towards it anyway. Fear does not disappear first; obedience comes alongside it.

When they return, they do so changed: speaking, praising, wondering. God's presence has not removed risk from their lives, but it has given those lives meaning.

Christmas' invitation

Fear is not always about danger. Sometimes it is what we feel when something holy comes too close to ignore. Christmas proclaims that God has chosen nearness over distance, presence over power.

**Don't be afraid.
Jesus is here.**

Questions for discussion

- * What stands out to you about where and how Jesus is born in the Christmas story?
- * Where do you most long to hear the words "God is with you" this Christmas?
- * How might this story change how we understand vulnerability and strength?

Interactive activities

The Christmas story in a nutshell

For this interactive talk, see the [intergenerational resource](#).

Good news headlines

Ask people to gather in family or mixed-generation groups. Give each group a large sheet of paper and some pens.

Imagine that the shepherds have just arrived in Bethlehem and you are reporters covering the story. Working together, create a newspaper headline describing what the shepherds saw or discovered, for example:

- LOCAL SHEPHERDS FIND SAVIOUR!
- ANGELS LIGHT UP NIGHT SKY!
- BABY BRINGS HOPE TO THE WORLD!

Encourage groups to add pictures, illustrations and quotes from Mary, Joseph, the angels or the shepherds.

Invite groups to share their headlines with everyone or display them around the church.

Reflect together on how the shepherds hurried to tell others the good news they had received. The message of Jesus is still good news, and it is still worth sharing today.

Prayer ideas



Gift tag prayers



Give everyone a gift tag and invite them to write or draw a response on each side.

On one side:

Something they are thankful for this Christmas.

On the other side:

A gift they would like God to give to the world, such as peace, kindness, hope, friendship or healing.

Invite everyone to place their gift tags around the manger model, on the Christmas tree, or next to a wrapped present.

Take a moment to look at the display and offer a prayer of thanks for God's gifts to us, and for the gifts we long to see shared throughout the world.

For additional interactive prayer ideas, see the **intergenerational resource**.

**The
good news
to get across**

**Don't be afraid.
Jesus is here.**

Ways people can respond

Over Christmas, notice what is here

Each day, take a moment to pause and notice what is here, right now.

- Notice something good in front of you.
- Notice someone you are grateful for.
- Notice a moment of beauty, kindness or joy.
- Take a slow breath and remember that God is present with you.

You might end by saying:

"Jesus is here."

Why it helps

The shepherds were given good news, not about a distant future, but about something happening that very day: "to you is born this day a Saviour". The child they were seeking was close by, lying in a manger.

Anxiety can draw us into worrying about what might happen next. This practice helps us return our attention to the present moment, where God's presence can be received as a gift.

CHRISTMAS 1

27 December 2026

* Don't be afraid
Good things take time



Bible readings

Isaiah 61:10 – 62:3

Isaiah describes God's work as something that grows steadily, like a garden, unfolding in its own time.

Luke 2:22–40

Jesus is brought to the temple, where patient, faithful people recognise that God's long-awaited promises are quietly beginning to be fulfilled.

Songs and hymns

- 190 Angels, from the realms of glory
- 229 Mary and Joseph came to the temple
- 201 Good news, good news to you we bring
- 226 Birth brings a promise of new life awaking
- 197 Cradled in a manger, meanly
- 218 Unto us a boy is born

Opening liturgy

Object: a folded baby blanket or a carrycot



We gather in the days after Christmas, when the celebrations quieten, and ordinary life begins again.

Don't be afraid:

Good things take time.

The story slows down.

The child grows.

Faithful people wait,
and trust what is still unfolding.

Don't be afraid:

Good things take time.

God is at work not only in moments of arrival,
but in patience,
in persistence,
and in the long faithfulness of everyday life.

Don't be afraid:

Good things take time.

As we continue this journey together –

Don't be afraid:

Good things take time.

Background notes

They brought him up to Jerusalem

By the time Luke reaches this part of the story, the extraordinary has faded into the background. Angels have gone. Shepherds have returned to their fields. What remains is routine: parents bringing a child to the temple, following long-established customs.

Luke is careful to show that nothing dramatic appears to be happening. And yet, this quiet faithfulness is the soil in which something deeply significant unfolds. God's work has not stopped – it has slowed, settled and taken root.

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon

Simeon and Anna embody a way of living shaped by patience. Simeon has spent years waiting for God's promise to be fulfilled. Anna has devoted decades to prayer and presence, largely unseen.

Their waiting is not empty or passive. Luke describes Simeon as someone who is attentive to the Spirit, open to God's movement without trying to hurry it along. Like seeds beneath the soil, God's work has been taking place over a long stretch of time, invisible but real.

Fear often tells us that waiting means nothing is happening. Luke suggests the opposite.

For as the earth brings forth its shoots...

The prophet Isaiah compares God's work to growth in a garden: just as the earth brings forth shoots and seeds slowly rise to the surface, so God causes righteousness and praise to grow in their own time.

That image helps us see what is happening here. The child Simeon takes in his arms does not yet look like salvation for the world. Nothing about this moment suggests speed, power or scale. But growth has begun. What God has planted is alive, and it will come to maturity.

Good things, Scripture reminds us, often take time to show what they are becoming.

This child...

Simeon's words hold hope and realism together. This child will bring light and renewal, but not without resistance. There will be challenge, misunderstanding and pain. Growth is rarely smooth or uninterrupted.

Isaiah's garden does not spring up overnight. It must endure weather, seasons and disturbance. Likewise, God's promises unfold slowly, requiring patience as well as trust. Delay is not denial; difficulty is not failure.

She came and began to praise God and to speak about the child

Anna recognises what is happening too and begins to speak about the child to those who have also been waiting and watching. Her joy does not demand attention. It flows quietly from a life shaped by long faithfulness.

Between Simeon and Anna, Luke gives us an intergenerational moment: those who have waited longest glimpsing what God has been growing all along.

Christmas' invitation

In a world that prizes immediacy, Luke offers a different rhythm. God's purposes unfold like a garden, not a performance: slowly, steadily, often unnoticed at first.

Fear tells us that if change takes time, it may never arrive. But Scripture tells a deeper truth.

Don't be afraid.

Good things take time.

Questions for discussion

- * What feels slow, unfinished or unresolved in your life at the moment?
- * Simeon and Anna wait for many years. Are you a patient person?
- * How does this passage challenge ideas that transformation must be quick or dramatic?

Interactive activities

Growing things

Before the service, gather a selection of items showing different stages of growth: seeds, bulbs, seedlings, fruit: photographs of babies, children and adults: or pictures of plants at different stages. Invite people to sort them into order from beginning to maturity.

Talk together: Which stage is the most exciting? Which stage takes the longest? Which stages are easy to miss?

Reflect on the way Simeon and Anna recognised something important in Jesus while he was still a baby. They saw what he would become before anyone else could.

Ask: What good things are still growing in our lives? What might God be growing that we cannot yet fully see?

Waiting well

Give each group a paper plate and a selection of simple craft materials.

Challenge them to create something beautiful in stages. Every minute introduce a pause when they must stop and wait before continuing.

Afterwards ask:

- How did it feel to stop when you wanted to carry on?
- Did waiting make the finished result better or worse?
- What helps us trust when progress feels slow?

Link the activity to Simeon and Anna's long years of waiting and Isaiah's image of seeds growing beneath the surface.

Prayer ideas



Blanket prayers

Using the baby blanket or carrycot from the opening liturgy, invite people to imagine God's love gently wrapping around people who are waiting.

Invite simple spoken responses:

- For people waiting for healing.
- For people waiting for answers.
- For people waiting for change.
- For people waiting for hope.

After each prayer, invite everyone to say:
Good things take time. God, help us to trust you.

Seed prayer



Give everyone a seed, bean or small paper seed shape.

Invite them to hold it while praying silently about something unfinished in their life.

Pray: God of patient growth, thank you that you are working even when we cannot see it. Help us trust the seeds you have planted. Give us patience while they grow. Amen.

Invite people to take their seed home as a reminder.

**The
good news
to get across**

**Don't be afraid.
Good things take time.**

Ways people can respond

Practise patient attention

Choose one moment each day to slow down and wait without rushing.

- It could be standing in a queue, sitting quietly or waiting for something to finish.
- Resist the urge to fill the moment with distraction.

Why it helps

Simeon and Anna wait patiently for years, learning to recognise God's promise when it appears. This practice helps us become more comfortable with waiting, and more attentive to what is quietly unfolding over time.

CHRISTMAS 2

3 January 2027

* Don't be afraid
God has made a
home among us



Bible readings

Jeremiah 31:7–14

God promises to gather scattered people, turning grief into joy and bringing them home with care and compassion.

John 1:10–18

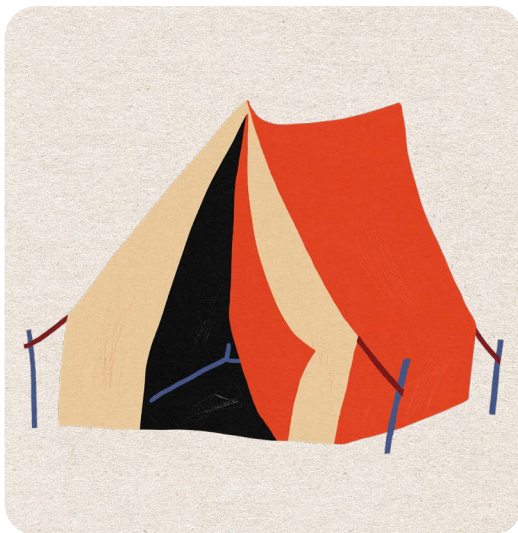
John proclaims that God's Word has taken flesh and made a home among us, offering grace and truth through lived presence.

Songs and hymns

- 330 Joy to the world, the Lord is come!
- 101 Before the world began
- 208 Let earth and heaven combine
- 246 He came to earth in poverty
- 679 Come, build the Church – not heaps of stone
- 175 Light of the world, you stepped down into darkness
- 554 In this place, with God's word

Opening liturgy

Object: a tent, either a model or a real one



We gather in the turning of the year,
as Christmas fades into the background,
and the days begin to stretch ahead.

Don't be afraid:

God has made a home among us.

The Word has taken flesh,
not for a moment,
but to dwell,
to remain,
and to live alongside us.

Don't be afraid:

God has made a home among us.

Not waiting for perfection or readiness,
God chooses ordinary places,
ordinary lives,
and stays.

Don't be afraid:

God has made a home among us.

As we make room again for God's presence

Don't be afraid:

God has made a home among us.

Background notes

He came to what was his own

John describes a world made through God's Word, and yet deeply slow to recognise God's presence when it arrives. God comes into the world not as a force to be reckoned with, but as a life to be lived among others. The world keeps turning, unaware that everything has changed.

This is not a story of God overpowering the world, but of God choosing to enter it patiently, from within.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us

When John says that the Word "lived among us", he uses a word that means pitched a tent. God chooses to dwell among us; not at a distance, but within the life of the world, sharing fully in human experience.

I am going to bring them from the land of the north...

This echoes earlier promises, where God speaks of gathering scattered people and bringing them home again. Jeremiah imagines God leading people back with care and tenderness, turning weeping into comfort and restoring gladness where loss has dominated. God's presence is not abstract; it moves into the places that have known exile, grief and exhaustion.

We have seen his glory

John insists that what takes place here is glory; but not distant or blinding glory. This glory can be looked at directly. It is shaped by grace and truth: mercy that heals and honesty that does not look away from pain.

Jeremiah's vision is similar. God's glory is revealed not through spectacle, but through restoration: lives made whole, communities renewed, sorrow slowly giving way to joy. Presence itself becomes God's way of mending what has been broken.

Grace upon grace

Not everyone welcomes this nearness. Some turn away; others fail to see what is unfolding. Yet God does not withdraw. Instead, God continues to give – offering belonging, dignity and life to those who receive what has been made present in Jesus.

Jeremiah speaks of satisfaction after scarcity, of goodness finally filling empty places. John echoes this with his language of fullness and abundance. God does not ration presence. God pours it out.

A shepherd who stays close

Jeremiah imagines God as a shepherd, gathering, guiding and caring for the flock. John's image of God dwelling among us carries the same promise. God does not rule from afar but walks alongside, sharing space with the vulnerable and overlooked.

Fear often tells us that distance is safer – that God must remain removed to remain powerful. Scripture tells a different story. God's strength is shown in closeness.

Fear grows when people feel scattered, displaced or forgotten. John and Jeremiah together insist that God's answer to that fear is presence – lived, local and lasting.

Don't be afraid.

God has made a home among us.

Questions for discussion

- * What does 'home' mean to you?
- * What strikes you about the idea of God choosing to dwell rather than visit?
- * How could we become better at making space for God – and for one another?

Interactive activities

Building a home

Provide materials such as cardboard boxes, building blocks, Lego, cushions or sheets. Invite intergenerational groups to build a small house, shelter or tent.

When finished, ask:

- What makes somewhere feel like home?
- Is home just a place?
- How do people help create a sense of belonging?

Reflect on John's description of God "making a home among us". God does not simply visit but stays.

Welcome mat

Place a large sheet of paper cut into the shape of a welcome mat in the centre of the worship space.

Invite people to write or draw things that help people feel welcome – kindness, listening, friendship, hospitality, acceptance.

As the mat fills up, reflect on how Christians are called to make room for others because God has made room for us.

Prayer ideas



Tent prayer

Use the home built during the activity or a tent as the service object, invite people to gather around it, get in it or look towards it.

Pray for:

- people who feel lonely
- people who are far from home
- refugees and displaced people
- those who feel unwelcome or excluded.

After each section say: *God has made a home among us. Thank you for staying close.*

Home in God prayer



Give everyone a paper house shape. Invite them to write or draw:



- a place they are thankful for
- someone who makes them feel at home
- a place needing God's peace.

Collect the houses to create a village display while music plays.

Close by praying: *Jesus, thank you that you choose to dwell among us. Help us make room for others as you have made room for us. Amen.*

**The
good news
to get across**

**Don't be afraid.
God has made a home
among us.**

Ways people can respond

This week, notice where you feel at home

Each day, notice a place, moment or interaction that feels like home – somewhere you feel at ease, welcomed or grounded. Take a moment to be present there.

You might ask:

“What makes this feel like home?”

Why it helps

John speaks of God choosing to dwell among us: not visiting briefly, but making a home. This practice helps us recognise God's presence in ordinary, lived-in spaces, and to see home as something shared, not just owned.

EPIPHANY

6 January 2027

* Don't be afraid
God leaves traces
to guide us



Bible readings

Isaiah 60:1–6

Isaiah envisions God's light drawing people from many places, illuminating a world being renewed.

Matthew 2:1–12

The magi follow subtle signs that lead them to Jesus, showing that God guides seekers through traces rather than certainty.

Songs and hymns

- 224 As with gladness men of old
- 625 Deep in the darkness a starlight is gleaming
- 331 King of kings, majesty
- 231 The silent stars shine down on us
- 629 God of my faith, I offer you my doubt
- 67 This, this is the God we adore

Opening liturgy

Object: lots of feathers,
scattered around



We gather having journeyed through
Advent and Christmas,
with familiar stories behind us,
and new understanding still forming.

Don't be afraid:

God leaves traces to guide us.

The story tells of signs and clues,
of travellers paying attention,
of guidance discovered along the way,
rather than all at once.

Don't be afraid:

God leaves traces to guide us.

God's presence is not always loud or
obvious,
but marked gently,
inviting us to notice,
and to follow.

Don't be afraid:

God leaves traces to guide us.

As we open our eyes and our hearts again

Don't be afraid:

God leaves traces to guide us.

Background notes

We observed his star at its rising

Matthew introduces the magi as people who are paying attention. They notice patterns, movements and signs that others overlook. Their journey does not begin with a clear instruction or a fixed destination, but with careful observation and willingness to follow what they have glimpsed.

God's guidance here is subtle rather than commanding. It appears in small traces that require noticing; marks left in the world for those who are attentive enough to see them.

They set out; and there, ahead of them, went the sign they had seen

The sign the magi follow does not rush or compel them. It allows space for travel, uncertainty, questions and detours. Their movement unfolds at a human pace.

Throughout this season, we have used the image of a feather – something light, fragile and easily missed – to speak of how God's presence often shows itself. Not as certainty or control, but as a trace: enough to invite the next step, not enough to remove all risk.

Fear often comes when we feel forced forwards without choice. This story offers another picture: guidance that invites trust rather than obedience under pressure.

Herod secretly called for the wise men

Not everyone welcomes what the magi are following. Their searching unsettles Herod, exposing anxieties rooted in fear and a need to hold on to control. The same trace that draws seekers forwards reveals resistance in those invested in power staying where it is.

Matthew quietly contrasts two responses: one shaped by attentiveness and openness, and the other by fear of losing authority. God's guidance does not create fear. Fear grows where guidance is resisted.

They all gather together, they come to you

Isaiah imagines a world where people are drawn together from far and wide, bringing what they have, responding to God's activity already unfolding among them. Matthew shows that vision beginning to take shape. The magi come from beyond Israel, guided not by belonging or certainty, but by attention and trust.

The traces God leaves are not reserved for insiders. They are scattered widely, inviting participation from many directions.

They were overwhelmed with joy

When the magi arrive, they find no display of power; only a child in an ordinary home. The trace they have followed does not lead to dominance, but to vulnerability.

And yet their response is joy. They recognise that this fragile presence matters. They offer what they have brought and return home by a different way, carrying the journey within them.

Epiphany's invitation

Fear often comes from wanting certainty and clear answers, fixed maps or guaranteed outcomes. Epiphany offers something more realistic and more hopeful: traces rather than proof.

Like a feather on the ground, God's presence can be easy to miss, something we may struggle to recognise or stay aware of. Yet it is enough for us: enough to notice, enough to follow, enough to trust the next step.

Don't be afraid.

God leaves traces to guide us.

Questions for discussion

- * The magi follow signs rather than certainty. How comfortable are you with faith that involves not knowing everything?
- * Where have you noticed small signs or hints of direction recently?
- * What helps you pay attention to God's guidance without demanding clear answers?

Interactive activities

Find the feathers

Before the service, hide feathers around the worship space. You could use craft feathers, paper feathers or feather-shaped cut-outs.

Invite everyone to search for as many feathers as they can find. As each feather is discovered, ask people to bring it to the front and place it around a star, candle or the nativity scene.

When most of the feathers have been found, reflect together:

- Were the feathers easy or difficult to spot?
- What helped you find them?
- Which feathers were hidden in unexpected places?

Talk about how the magi followed small clues that helped them find Jesus. They did not have all the answers, but they paid attention to the signs they were given.

Sometimes God's guidance can be like the feathers hidden around the room – easy to miss, but there for those who are looking.

Follow the star

Before the service, place a large star somewhere visible in the worship space. Create a winding trail leading towards it using paper stars, footprints, lanterns, feathers or pieces of tinsel.

Invite volunteers of different ages to take turns following the trail. At several points along the route, place cards with questions such as:

- Have you ever had to make a journey without knowing exactly where it would end?
- Who helps guide you when you're unsure what to do?
- What helps you trust the next step when you can't see the whole path?

As each participant reaches a stopping point, pause briefly to hear some responses.

When the trail reaches the large star, place beneath it a simple picture or figure of the Christ child.

Reflect together on the following:

The magi did not receive a map with every detail marked out. They followed one sign at a time. Sometimes the star seemed clear; sometimes they had questions and took wrong turns. Yet they kept travelling.

Faith is often like that. God does not usually show us the whole journey at once. Instead, God gives us enough light for the next step. Invite everyone to look at the trail and notice that no single star showed the whole route. It was many small signs together that led the travellers to Jesus. Don't be afraid. God leaves traces to guide us.

Star seekers

Before the service, give everyone a paper star and something to write with.

Ask people to think of someone who has helped guide them at some point in life: a family member, teacher, friend, a church member, someone who showed them

kindness or helped them find their way

Invite them to write the person's name (or draw a picture if they prefer) on their star.

In mixed-age groups, encourage people to share their stars and tell a short story about that person. Children may wish to draw instead of write, and no one should feel obliged to share.

Gather all the stars and place them around the manger, a candle, or a large star displayed at the front.

Reflect together: The magi followed a star to Jesus. God's guidance came through something they noticed and trusted. Often God guides us through people as well as signs. Sometimes we are the ones being guided. Sometimes we are the ones helping someone else find their way.

Close with a simple question:

Who might God be inviting you to guide, encourage or walk alongside this year?

Conclude: The star did not travel the journey for the magi – it simply showed them the next direction. In the same way, God often guides us through small acts of wisdom, friendship and encouragement.

Follow the light prayer

Place a large star or candle at the front of the worship space. Invite everyone to use their hands during the prayers:

- Place hands over eyes – praying for people who feel lost, confused or uncertain.
- Cup hands together – praying for people searching for hope and wisdom.
- Stretch hands forwards – praying for courage to take the next step in faith.
- Open hands wide – praying for God's light to shine in the world.

After each section, invite everyone to respond: *God leaves traces to guide us. Help us to notice.*

Prayer ideas



Star prayers



Give everyone a paper star and a pen. Invite people to write or draw a prayer on their star. They might choose:

- someone who needs guidance
- a decision they need to make
- a place in the world needing God's light and peace
- something they hope for in the year ahead.

As gentle music plays, invite everyone to bring their star to the front and place it around a large star, a candle or the nativity scene.

Conclude: *God of light, guide us when the way ahead feels unclear. Help us trust you one step at a time. Amen.*

**The
good news
to get across**

**Don't be afraid.
God leaves traces
to guide us.**

Ways people can respond

This week, take the next step

When you feel worried, overwhelmed or uncertain this week, pause and ask yourself:

What is the next step I can take?

Try not to solve everything at once. Instead, focus on one small action, one conversation, one decision, or one task that will help you move forwards.

You might write it down, say a short prayer, or simply take that step and see what happens.

Why it helps

The magi did not know the whole journey when they set out. They followed the guidance they had been given and discovered the next part of the journey as they travelled.

Anxiety often grows when we feel we need all the answers immediately. Focusing on the next step can help us stay present, reduce feelings of overwhelm, and trust that more guidance will come when it is needed.

BLUE CHRISTMAS



Planning your Blue Christmas service

Christmas can be a very difficult time for people of all faiths and none, 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.

We suggest that you plan the service along similar lines to your usual pattern of worship – prayers, hymns, a message – but with a few key differences:

- Expect less of participants than you might at your other services. For example, music may be performed rather than people being expected to sing along.
- Ensure the tone is quiet and reflective rather than loud and celebratory.
- When planning prayers and the message, offer **good news of hope for the future without minimising the pain that is felt now**. There are suggestions for prayers and preaching below.
- Give careful thought to 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. There is lots of guidance on praying for others at methodist.org.uk/PrayWithOthers
- We suggest that this service be relatively short – 45 minutes is probably plenty. You could offer people the opportunity to remain in their seats at the end for some quiet contemplation if they wish, or to request prayer.

Songs and hymns

180 O Come, O Come, Emmanuel
It Is Well with My Soul

In the Bleak Midwinter
(Gustav Holst setting)

Bible readings: Luke 2:8–20

⁸ Now in that same region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹ to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!”

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

Isaiah 40:28–31; 41:8–10

²⁸ Have you not known? Have you not heard?

The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.

He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable.

²⁹ He gives power to the faint,
and strengthens the powerless.

³⁰ Even youths will faint and be weary,
and the young will fall exhausted;

³¹ but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles;
they shall run and not be weary;
they shall walk and not faint.

...

⁸ But you, Israel, my servant,
Jacob, whom I have chosen,
the offspring of Abraham, my friend;
⁹ you whom I took from the ends of the earth,
and called from its farthest corners,

saying to you, “You are my servant,
I have chosen you and not cast you off”;

¹⁰ do not fear, for I am with you,
do not be afraid, for I am your God;
I will strengthen you; I will help you;
I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.

Background notes

We focus on Luke 2:10–11: “But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.’” The story of the shepherds and the angels is a central Christmas text: in this service we focus on the words, *do not be afraid*. The sudden appearance of an angel of the Lord was unexpected and, it seems, frightening: Luke tells us that the shepherds were terrified (Luke 2:9). It seems that the presence of God’s messenger is deeply uncomfortable, inspiring profound awe and wonder.

This encounter was beyond the shepherds’ ordinary experience and outside their control, and they were afraid. Perhaps we, too, have good reasons to be afraid. Life can be very hard, and we may be frightened of what the future holds: for ourselves, for those we love, for our communities. So why shouldn’t we be afraid? The shepherds are told that the chosen one, the saviour the people of Israel have been waiting for, is finally here (Luke 2:11) and can be found in a baby asleep in an animal’s feeding trough (Luke 2:12). Jesus comes as a frail human baby – God with us, as one of us. The reassurance, it seems, is the presence of Jesus.

This message needs to be handled with great sensitivity. *Don’t be afraid* could seem dismissive of people’s very valid and perhaps uncontrollable fears. The heart of the matter is this: we are not alone in our fear. Jesus is with us. The complementary text from Isaiah 40–41 may help here: “do not fear, for I am with you; do not be afraid, for I am your God” (41:10). We are not asking people to switch off their fear, but rather to recognise the presence of God within and alongside that fear. By coming together for a Blue Christmas service, we can keep one another company in our fear; a sign for one another that God keeps us company too.

Questions for reflection

- * What does God’s presence feel like to you?
- * What difference does it make knowing that someone is with us when we’re afraid?
- * How can we help each other to know we are not alone?
- * How can we help each other to notice God’s presence?

Interactive activities

Make sure everyone has a feather (ideally two or three feathers), some washi tape or masking tape, a small piece of ribbon or string and a pen.

Draw people's attention to the feather on the ground in the picture of the shepherds and the angel. (You could have copies of the postcard available for people to look at, project the picture on a screen, or both.)

Invite people to hold a feather while you are speaking – this will enable people with visual impairments to participate more fully. Point out that the passage from Isaiah references wings too: "they shall mount up with wings like eagles".

Invite people to think about moments when:

- they have been aware of God's presence
- someone has been with them during a frightening time – a friend, family member, perhaps a stranger.

They should then write a few words to remind them of what happened on a piece of washi tape. If they wish to, they could write a few examples, each one on a different piece of tape. Finally, have them fold the ribbon in half to make a loop and use the tape to attach it to the stalk of the feather, wrapping it around to secure it. If people want the writing to still be visible, they could fold the tape back on itself like a bread-bag closure.

Prayer ideas

Have people hold a feather while the service leader prays, using these prompts:

- Praise God the Father who loves us, declaring "I am with you... I am your God; I will strengthen you; I will help you" (Isaiah 41:10).
- Praise Jesus who comes to be with us in our fear; who knows what it is to live a human life.
- Praise the Holy Spirit who brings God's presence to us day by day.
- Confess that we often miss the signs of God all around us.
- Ask God to help us in our fear.
- Ask God to make us more aware of God's presence, in big and small ways, every day.





**The
good news
to get across**

**You are not alone
in your fear.**

Ways people can respond

The feathers could be used in various ways, depending on how people feel:

- They could take their feather away and hang it on a Christmas tree – a way of raising their awareness of God's presence during the Christmas period.
- They could take a second feather, ribbon and piece of tape so that they can watch for more signs of God's presence, making a second feather when they notice them. They could even layer up the tape, adding a new layer every time they notice something new.
- They could give a feather to someone else who has been for them a sign of God's presence – a way of saying thank you, seeking connection, and encouraging the other person that God is at work through them.



Bible readings

Carol services appeal to a broad range of people, including many unaffiliated people, and for some 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
- Matthew 1:18–25
- Luke 2:1–7
- Luke 2:8–20
- Matthew 2:1–12
- John 1:1–14

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 grumpy about messing with tradition!

Ask people in your community – both within and beyond your church – for their requests. For example, you could take a light-hearted straw poll at your toddler group to find out people's favourite carols.

Make a point of asking people who worship Jesus in other languages for carol suggestions from their home culture. You could invite them to sing as part of the carol service. Be sure to offer a genuine and heartfelt welcome – don't treat the singers as a novelty item on your programme.

Background notes

Out of all the services you hold each year, your carol service is the most likely to attract unaffiliated visitors. Lots of unaffiliated people 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 candle-lit church. Whatever the reason they've come, we want them to hear a simple, clear message of good news. Ideally this will be no more than 5–10 minutes long, to keep people's attention: it's about quality, not quantity.

Three times in the Christmas story, angels appear and tell people: "Don't be afraid". The angel Gabriel says it to Mary, the mother of Jesus, when he appears to tell her she will become pregnant: "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God" (Luke 1:30). An angel says it to Joseph, Mary's fiancé, in a dream: "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from

the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:20). An angel says it to the terrified shepherds on the night of Jesus' birth: "Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord" (Luke 2:10). In fact, "don't be afraid" (or similar wording) appears dozens of times in the Bible.

In the case of the shepherds, it seems that the sudden appearance of an angel frightened them. Luke tells us: "an angel of the Lord stood before [the shepherds], and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified" (Luke 2:9). The presence of God's messenger, reflecting God's glory, is deeply uncomfortable, inspiring profound awe and wonder. This is something quite different from the way angels are pictured on Christmas cards and tree ornaments.

Mary is "much perplexed" by the angel's words; she "pondered what sort of greeting this might be". While this suggests confusion rather than fear, the angel's response is "Do not be afraid". Mary is perhaps struggling to understand the angel's message; why it has been brought to her and how to reconcile it with her previous experience of the world. Perhaps we, too, experience life events that confuse us, that turn our understanding of the world upside down.

In Joseph's case, he had a much more earthly reason to be afraid. He thought that his fiancée had been unfaithful and that he needed to divorce her quietly. Perhaps he was worried about the shame of marrying Mary, while also worried about destroying her reputation. We, too, carry all kinds of fears. We may have very good reasons to be worried, afraid, perhaps terrified. Life can be very hard, and we may be frightened of what the future holds: for ourselves, for those we love, for our communities.

Repetition tells us something here. The refrain *don't be afraid* shows us how God wants to relate to us. God doesn't want us to cower in fear; instead, God comes to us in Jesus. Jesus is referred to as the "saviour", and the name Jesus means "God saves".

Part of the meaning of *don't be afraid* is *don't be afraid – I'm here to help you find your way*. Like the person who sees us struggling and drops everything to lend a hand. And as well as coming to save, Jesus has come to be human with us, a baby "God is with us", as we read in Matthew 1:23. So the meaning of *don't be afraid* is also *don't be afraid – I'm here*. Like the person who comes to sit with us in our fear or pain, because company transforms it.

Questions for reflection

- * Think of a time when someone said to you, don't be afraid. How did it feel?
- * Who helps you when you're afraid?
- * Whose presence comforts you when you're afraid?

Interactive activities

A table offering the following creative activity could help people of all ages engage with the service, and may be particularly appreciated by neurodivergent people. You could provide some simple written instructions so that people can simply move to the table whenever they like, but make sure the instructions are read aloud at least once during the service to allow as many people as possible to participate.

Offer a selection of images of angels – you could cut them out from old Christmas cards and/or wrapping paper. Try to include lots of different images, including angels of different skin tones – royalty-free image sites such as unsplash.com and pexels.com have some great options. Include some small angel ornaments or tree decorations too for visually impaired

people to hold. Have slips of paper with the words “Don’t be afraid”, and glue sticks, tape, pens, coloured paper (eg sugar paper) and short pieces of ribbon or string available too.

Invite people to choose an angel picture that resonates with them and to write or draw on the back something that is making them fearful. Then have people glue the words “Don’t be afraid” on the front. They should make a loop with the ribbon and secure it with tape behind the angel’s head, to make a tree decoration. Finally, they should glue sugar paper on the back (covering up their writing, to keep their fears private) and cut around the sugar paper. They now have a tree ornament to take home to remind them of the message: *Don’t be afraid.*

Prayer ideas

Have people hold their angel decoration – or an angel ornament if they are visually impaired – and ask God to help us all to hear God’s message through the angel: *Don’t be afraid.*

You could pray for:

- situations in our world, such as wars, injustices or climate change
- situations in the UK that are causing people fear
- the things people are dealing with in their personal lives that cause worry
- asking God to bring help and healing, and to be with us when we are afraid.





**The
good news
to get across**

**Jesus is here to
save us and to
be with us.**

Ways people can respond

You could give people the option of making a second angel ornament to give to someone they know who is afraid.

Invite people to consider how they can keep someone company in their fear, whether that's sending someone a text on the morning of a difficult appointment, meeting them for a cup of tea, or listening without judgement.


The Methodist Church

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