Liturgies for the Lonely

Christmas Eve & Morning

prepared by Slats Toole

Introduction

In the middle of 2020, during a global pandemic, I moved halfway across the country, to live in a city I didn't know well. While I do have connections and friends in my new location, finding a church community is difficult. As an introvert, the idea of showing up at a Zoom coffee hour where I don't know anyone is horrifying, and while I do get a sense of a community through online worship practices (and am grateful for all of the leadership that makes that happen), so many practices have shifted for safety reasons that it's harder to get to know the worship life of a church. There's so much I miss; I miss singing together, passing the peace, moving through the liturgical year moored by a community where I am known and cared for and where I know and care for others.

The last time I felt this kind of disconnection from the church was when I was in undergrad. I was an extraordinarily busy theater major who did not have time to become an active part of a church. During one Holy Week when I was in tech for a show, but longed to be in services throughout the week, I started to come up with rituals I could do at home. It didn't replace communal worship, but did help focus and direct me until I could restructure my life to be active in church again.

As we face closures for longer than any of us hoped, I have been hit hard at the idea of going through the liturgical year without a local church community and without some of the rituals that help me engage in these seasons. I am amazed and uplifted by the creativity and possibility in worshipping online, and at the same time know that part of me will be mourning as we move through the church year. (This will be the first year in my living memory that I will not be in a church, singing "Silent Night", as the day moves from Christmas Eve to Christmas Day. That will be hard.)

So I am creating rituals for myself to help me get through some of the key moments of the church year, starting with All Saints Sunday, Advent, Christmas Eve, and Christmas Day. I am making them available for others in case they are useful. They are designed for individual use--feel free to adapt for relationships or families or roommates or whatever configuration you have, but there are so many resources for families out there already and fewer liturgical resources designed to be done alone. (It is less depressing to expand a resource to include more people than to simplify it to work for one!)

Introduction

While I have experience in many Protestant denominations, my theological center is the Reformed tradition as practiced in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). These liturgies are based on a slightly adapted four-fold pattern of worship. A traditional four-fold pattern includes Gathering, Word, Response (or Table), and Sending. I've adapted the Response/Table portion as "Practice". The Practice portion seeks to be an active response, in the same spirit as offering or the Lord's Supper when we gather communally, and will draw on different spiritual practices throughout this series. Some portions of the liturgies will be the same every time to help establish a ritual, and some will change with the week or season. A list of suggested hymns will be included, along with a link to the Spotify playlist I've made for that season or day. The Christmas Morning liturgy in this edition follows a simplified version of this template, while the Christmas Eve liturgy is an adaptation of a Lessons and Carols service.

Every portion of these liturgies is adaptable, from words to hymn selection to scriptures to practices. Use this resource as best benefits you. That could mean going through the liturgy exactly as printed or with minor adjustments. That could be using the liturgy as a scaffold to build your own, or inspiration for how to incorporate worship into your daily life. That could be collaging together this liturgy with other daily prayer resources you know and love. I suspect for many of us, this pandemic is a time of discovery when it comes to how we connect to God, ourselves, and each other, so use this as a tool for curiosity.

If this work is useful to you and you have resources to spare, my Venmo is @callmeslats. More than making a profit, though, I want this to go to those who need it right now, so feel free to share with anyone this might help.

Grace, peace, and safety to you, wherever you are, in whatever season of life you find yourself,

Slats

Preparing the Space

For me, creating a space for a ritual is almost as important as the ritual itself. Entering into a specific space signals us and helps us to engage in the specific activities we are used to performing in that space. In these times of social distancing, many of us have limited the number of spaces we are in, and our house/apartment/room becomes the space for almost all parts of our lives.

When I talk about preparing the space, I don't just mean the physical location where the ritual takes place. As we prepare the space, we use our senses to shift us out of our daily patterns of living and into a space of particular connection with God, like how walking into a sanctuary can refocus us towards worship.

If you have a space where you can permanently set up a worship space, that's great. If you don't (I don't), that's fine too. You don't need a lot of physical space to create this kind of ritual.

Your space will be unique to who you are and what is meaningful to you. Ultimately, you are preparing space that helps you slow down and connect with God. Here's a way to think through the different senses to help you discover what that may be like. If one of these draws you more, focus on that. If one isn't as relevant to you, let it go.

Sight

What do you see as you worship? Are there symbols like a cross, chalice, or pitcher, that help you feel more connected to a worship space? Candles? Are there objects that are connected with faith communities or people who have nurtured you: a Bible received at confirmation, a rock you've carried since one conference or reaffirmation of baptism, a gift from a mentor?

Hearing

What sounds help you focus and reset? What sounds put you in a posture of worship? For many of us, that might be music--creating your own playlist can be one way to think about what a particular day or season really means for you. Sounds of nature might bring you a feeling of peace. Or, perhaps sitting in silence, noticing the sounds of the world around you in a meditative way might be a way in to contemplation.

Preparing the Space

Touch

How does your body feel? Does it help you to wear the clothes you might normally wear to church, or something more comfortable that makes you feel cozy? Where, in your living space, does this ritual take place? At a table so you can easily write or draw? On a couch or bed so you can rest in this time of worship? On a meditation cushion that moves to towards prayer?

Smell

For me, this is the most helpful and powerful sense in creating a ritual. Is there a scented candle, stick of incense, or oil for diffusing that you can associate with this (and only this) time? (Tip: if you want to play around with different scents to find the perfect one, have some coffee grounds on standby to act as a palate cleanser for your nose!) If you can associate a scent with behavior, it tends to be one of the quickest ways to get into the headspace for that ritual.

Taste

Similar to smell, taste is a sense that is often overlooked and is tremendously powerful. While these liturgies do not include sacraments (which according to my tradition are meant to be celebrated in community), we can create a ritual around food or drink that helps us begin our worship. Perhaps it is a special kind of meal, or a specific tea that you only eat or drink before this ritual.

For This Season

Most of us have our spaces particularly decorated for the Christmas season, so this is one of the easier ones to prepare! However, there are a couple liturgical helpers you may want to have on hand for these liturgies. The first is to make sure that your Advent wreath has not only the four candles we associate with Advent, but also one candle (traditionally white and in the center of the wreath) that is the Christ candle we light to celebrate Christ with us. The second is that bells are often used to celebrate in Christian tradition—having a bell peal on Christmas is not uncommon in churches with belltowers or bell choirs. If you have any bells around your house (jingle bells are totally fine!), consider having it nearby to ring in Christmas Day!

For Christmas Eve

Music

There are so many wonderful Christmas carols, it is so hard to put together these liturgies without feeling like I've left out essential carols of the season! For the Christmas Eve service, I've suggested several carols for each spot in the service that would work well, so you can choose which you'd love to sing (and you can always sing more than one!) My general Christmas Spotify playlist can be found here. However, I have also created a special playlist with selections for each hymn that can either be listened to or sung along with. For those following along with the Christmas Eve Spotify playlist, the specific hymn selection for each moment is indicated in the liturgy. The Christmas Eve playlist can be found here.

Candlelight

For many of us, one of the defining features of a Christmas Eve service is singing "Silent Night" by candlelight. The lights in the sanctuary slowly dim, the light from the Christ candle is spread around the sanctuary, and we all raise our candles on the last verse. Most of us don't have fancy dimming lights in our house (though if you do, have fun with them on Christmas Eve!), so I've tried to adapt that practice for at home use for these liturgies. Begin the service with plenty of light in your space--preferably from multiple sources. These could be candles, lamps, overhead lights, Christmas trees, you name it! Throughout the liturgy, there will be seven times you are invited to extinguish a light source--feel free to adapt if you have a different number of light sources. By the time we get to "Silent Night", only the Advent and Christ candles are lit, echoing the experience of singing in a darkened sanctuary on Christmas Eve. You may also re-light candles around your space while singing "Silent Night", perhaps in gratitude for the people and communities that you have shared this night with before.

Timing

For those of you who are used to a service where Silent Night happens around midnight, this service is approximately 50 minutes long. You can shorten it by doing fewer verses of the carols, or lengthen it with longer spaces of silence. If you're following along with the Spotify playlist, starting around 11:15 should put "Silent Night" around midnight. I will be moving through this service starting at 11:15pm Central Time, so if you are doing this on the same schedule, know that we may be apart, but we are here together.

The Liturgy – Christmas Eve

Hymns included in the Christmas Eve Spotify playlist will be indicated with an asterisk.
Begin the service with plenty of light in your space. You may say the gathering lines while filling your space with light, so that everything except for the Advent wreath and the Christ Candle are illuminated.

Gathering

While lighting the candles and/or stick of incense:

Let my prayer rise like incense before You,
And the lifting up of my hands as an offering.

Opening Hymn

"O Come, All Ye Faithful"* "Before the Marvel of this Night"
"On Christmas Night All Christians Sing" "Once In Royal David's City"

Lighting of the Advent Wreath

I light this first candle for hope.
I light this second candle for peace.
I light this third candle for joy.
I light this fourth candle for love.

Either sing or speak these words:

O come, O come, Emmanuel and ransom captive Israel
that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.

Lessons and Carols

Prayer for Illumination

As I keep watch this night, hold me in Your story. Awake in me the hope. Let me gasp in wonder. Amaze me with Your birth. Replace my fear with joy. Guide me in Your wisdom. I shall marvel at Your salvation. Amen.

Hymn

"Of the Father's Love Begotten"* "Creator of the Stars of Night"
"The Snow Lay on the Ground" "A Stable Lamp Is Lighted"

The Liturgy – Christmas Eve

Lesson One

Isaiah 9:2; 6–7

> The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined. For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

Extinguish one source of light, saying:

As I keep watch this night, hold me in Your story.

Hymn

"Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus"* "Comfort, Comfort Now My People"
"Jesus, Jesus, O What a Wonderful Child"

Lesson Two

Isaiah 11:1–3a; 4a; 6–9

> A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

The Liturgy – Christmas Eve

Extinguish one source of light, saying:

As I keep watch this night, awake in me the hope.

Hymn

"Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming"* "O Day of Peace"

"We Wait the Peaceful Kingdom"

Lesson Three

Luke 1:26–35; 38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

Extinguish one source of light, saying:

As I keep watch this night, let me gasp in wonder.

Hymn

"What Child Is This?"* "Canticle of the Turning"

"Infant Holy, Infant Lowly"

The Liturgy – Christmas Eve

Lesson Four

Luke 2:1–7

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

Extinguish one source of light, saying:

As I keep watch this night, amaze me with Your birth.

Hymn

"It Came Upon the Midnight Clear"*
"O Little Town of Bethlehem"
"Away in a Manger"
"Still, Still, Still"

Lesson Five

Luke 2:8-16

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 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 Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

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." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger.

The Liturgy – Christmas Eve

Extinguish one source of light, saying:

As I keep watch this night, replace my fear with joy.

Hymn

"Hark, the Herald Angels Sing"* "Angels We Have Heard On High"
"The First Noel" "While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks"

Lesson Six

Matthew 2:1–12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'" Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage."

When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Extinguish one source of light, saying:

As I keep watch this night, guide me in Your wisdom.

Hymn

"In the Bleak Midwinter"* "What Star is This, with Beams So Bright"
"We Three Kings" "Go, Tell It on the Mountain"

The Liturgy – Christmas Eve

Lesson Seven

John 1:1–14

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

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.

But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

Extinguish one source of light, saying:

As I keep watch this night, I shall marvel at Your salvation.

Contemplation

Spend time in contemplation and prayer after experiencing the Word. Adjust the space to what centers you. If that is silence, cultivate that silence. If that is music, play something that brings you peace. Assume whatever physical posture allows you to open yourself to God. If it helps you to draw or write, do so. If it is better for you to be still, be still.

For those of following the Christmas Eve playlist, this is where "Salvation is Created" should be played. If you want to be sure that you sing "Silent Night" at midnight, here is a good opportunity to check in, staying in this space for a longer or shorter amount of time as you need.

The Liturgy – Christmas Eve

Candlelight

At this time, if there is any other light besides the Advent wreath, extinguish that light. Taking the flame from the fourth candle on the Advent wreath, the candle of love, light the Christ candle in the center of the wreath, saying,

What came into being was life, and that life is the light of all people.

Hymn: "Silent Night"

During this song, you may hold up a candle of your own. If you would like, you are invited to light other candles or light sources in the room again as the song progresses. If you are holding a candle, raise it higher on the last verse.

Hold the silence after "Silent Night" for as long as you need to before moving forward.

If you have a bell, now would be the time to ring it. If you are following along with the Spotify playlist, continue to the "Bell Peal".

Hymn

"Joy to the World"*

"On This Day, Earth Shall Ring"

"Love Has Come!"

The Liturgy – Christmas Morning

Hymn Suggestions for this liturgy:

"O Come, All Ye Faithful"
"Awake! Awake, and Greet the New Morn"
"Good Christian Friends Rejoice"
"Where Shepherds Lately Knelt"

Gathering

While lighting a candle and/or stick of incense:

Let my prayer rise like incense before You,
And the lifting up of my hands as an offering.

Opening Hymn

Lighting of the Advent Wreath

I light this first candle for hope.
I light this second candle for peace.
I light this third candle for joy.
I light this fourth candle for love.
I light the Christ candle in celebration of God here on earth!

Either sing or speak these words:

Love has come, and never will leave us! Love is life everlasting and free. Love is Jesus within and among us. Love is the peace our hearts are seeking. Love! Love! Love is the gift of Christmas. Love! Love! Praise to You, God on high!

Word

Prayer for Illumination

Enliven these words and my hearing, that they may leap off the page, and I may rejoice to hear their wisdom. Amen.

Scripture

Hebrews 1:1-12
Psalm 148

For a musical setting, see page 18.

John 1:1-14

The Liturgy – Christmas Morning

Contemplation

Spend time in contemplation and prayer after experiencing the Word. Adjust the space to what centers you. If that is silence, cultivate that silence. If that is music, play something that brings you peace. Assume whatever physical posture allows you to open yourself to God. If it helps you to draw or write, do so. If it is better for you to be still, be still. Stay in this practice for at least five minutes--you may want to set a gentle alarm or note the number of songs you'll listen to in this time, to ensure you do not move on from this contemplation too early.

Prayer for Christmas Morning

We have always said
that this morning is unlike any other.
We have always proclaimed
that this day is different,
but this year, O God...
this year is different in a way
we could never have imagined.

And yet,
we are here with You.
All of us,
the church united and scattered,
followers that have heard tell
of the star and the cross
and have committed ourselves
to walk across this earth
like You did.

On this different of all different days
as we mourn our familiar rituals
we remember the familiar story,
recall the familiar promises,
sing the familiar songs,

The Liturgy – Christmas Morning

our prayers are many
and our prayers are simple:

be born in us today.

If You are truly a God
who longed to be with us
to save us
so much that You took on flesh
and all its beauties and failings
we could sure use some evidence of that
right
about
now.

So whatever this day looks like,
come into this day.
Show Yourself to us
in magnificent displays of glory
or unexpected, welcome comfort.
Meet us in our mixed emotions,
our joy and our weeping,
and hold us together,
even as we are apart.
Amen.

Sending

Closing Hymn

While extinguishing the candles and/or incense:

As I continue on, O Christ: be with me, before me, behind me, beneath me, above me, within me, around me. Amen.

Scripture – Christmas Morning

Hebrews 1:1–12

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

For to which of the angels did God ever say, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you"? Or again, "I will be his Father, and he will be my Son"? And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says, "Let all God's angels worship him." Of the angels he says, "He makes his angels winds, and his servants flames of fire."

But of the Son he says, "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, and the righteous scepter is the scepter of your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions." And, "In the beginning, Lord, you founded the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands; they will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like clothing; like a cloak you will roll them up, and like clothing they will be changed. But you are the same, and your years will never end."

Scripture – Christmas Morning

Psalm 148

For a musical setting, sing the Taizé piece "Laudate Dominum" before beginning the reading and every time a refrain is indicated.

Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord from the heavens; praise him in the heights!
Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his host!
Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars!
Praise him, you highest heavens, and you waters above the heavens! *[Refrain]*

Let them praise the name of the Lord,
for he commanded and they were created.
He established them forever and ever;
he fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed. *[Refrain]*

Praise the Lord from the earth, you sea monsters and all deeps,
fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind fulfilling his command!
Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars!
Wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds!
Kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the earth!
Young men and women alike, old and young together! *[Refrain]*

Let them praise the name of the Lord,
for his name alone is exalted;
his glory is above earth and heaven.
He has raised up a horn for his people, p
raise for all his faithful, for the people of Israel who are close to him.
Praise the Lord! *[Refrain]*

Scripture – Christmas Morning

John 1:1–14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.

But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

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