Write the Advent vision; make Christmas plain enough so that a Zoomer may read it ...
   a workshop of Advent, Christmas and Epiphany possibilities
Maren C. Tirabassi, October 20, 2020

Thank you all so very much for your participation in Tuesdays’ workshop. Please feel free to use any of these resources. If you need them in another format please be in touch with me
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How is this year like the time immediately preceding the birth of Christ?
(a way to help congregations understand that their experience with all its discontinuity and anxiety is actually closer to the original feelings of people in first century Palestine than a month with Chrismons, pageants, caroling in assisted living, decking the halls and cantatas)

It was a census year. OK -- can’t do too much with that.

It was a time of significant cleanliness protocols and quarantine.

It was a time of waiting without any idea of the end ... while we see Advent as a “count-down”
What is like this is the pandemic.

It was a time of dangerous political system causing violent divisiveness and a time that was filled with racism and ethnic prejudice.

The birth of Jesus was not at home ... not where expected ... read not at the church.

How are we like the early church?

Well, they used “codes” like the fish symbol to identify community and we have Zoom codes, Google meet codes and Facebook Live and You Tube addresses! ... ways to find each other.

The locus of worship was the literal home – not a beautiful sanctuary

The beginning of an historical adaptation device of borrowing from culture

What do your people need particularly this year?
My answers: Connection, Celebration, and Mourning

Your answers:

Giving hope in the midst of shattered expectations
Connection with one another
Help re-connecting with the sacred
Sense of normalcy
Christmas Eve together
Regaining lost traditions
Michael Caine on Wynton Marsalis from the annual meeting ...  
Is the magic ruined or is this a chance to do our best?  
Play, variation, daring and mastery

Familiar practices and church member agency -- some suggestions for 2020

An Advent Calendar of Readings from church members – memories, poems and readings for the days of the season, gathered by November 10, shared among the congregation (not more widely dispersed if materials are under copyright without permission.

An Advent Wreath Ceremony for 2020 -- located in the home (see following)

Blessing the Greens or Decking the Halls ...  
1) Literally greens  
2) Blessing a piece of the crèche (I have a liturgy if anyone needs this)  
3) Blessing an ornament ... tell the story of it ... email the story ...

Caroling – a visit and music (see following)

Las Posadas (a bridge between caroling and pageant) (see following)

ZOOM pageant ... the birth of Christ in Gallery View

Connecting People

To each other: No-so-Secret Nicolas ... pairing off of people / households  
Secret Nicholas ... send things ... cards, jokes, scriptures  
To the church: Boxes sent to homes (resources available online)

Blue Christmas (small group time) imperfectly reported by me.

Group 1: A time to acknowledge bruising, Christmas is coming, even in a pandemic.

Tim -- First Church Concord “Blues Christmas” November 15 1:00 drops afterward available on Church website (not interactive)

Group 2: Gina – connection with local hospice tree of memories with ceramic ornaments (available to families later) outdoor ceremony with physical distancing.

Group 3 (their report) discussed soliciting losses in advance and including those losses, either individually or in categories, in the service. It occurs to me that there might be issues with some people who have losses they need to name to me but not publicly.

After each loss is named, ring a hand bell or a prayer bowl.
Al Hoyt notes that the local access TV channel will run recordings of our services if we ask.

Blue ornaments.

Not mentioned in my report out: One member of our group is in a church that is having a Stevens Ministers series on loss, and their service will be the culmination of that series.

**Group 4:** Group was new to the service.

Outreach to those who would be aloe, including empty-nesters.

Outdoors (tough New Englanders) use electric candles ... some way to video for those in homes?

**Group 5:** Pre-recorded event “The Missing Year”

Patty Marsden important to name all the losses ... avoid judgement that a lost vacation is less significant than a death, all are simply held in love.

**Group 6:** Use of symbols of loss, remembrance and hope

Turn to the psalms (particularly good in Interfaith setting)

The blending the three seasons, letting go of external structures (seasons, lectionaries)

An Advent with Magi *(see following)*

**Christmas and Epiphany** ... The Work of Advent (after Howard Thurman)

**Finding resources (multiple resources):**


Godspace [https://godspacelight.com/](https://godspacelight.com/)

recommended by Gina Finocchiaro [https://www.worshipdesignstudio.com/](https://www.worshipdesignstudio.com/)
An Advent Wreath Ceremony for 2020

Every home should have a circle with four lights. In some places, some people will be in church but always we name that the primary place of claiming God’s light is where each person lives.

Several years ago Cláudio Carvalhaes, professor of worship at Union Theological Seminary, suggested that we lament before we light – naming those things which oppose or diminish hope, peace, joy and love. We name them and then claim the power of that light over them. I have always remembered that lesson and in this strange year his insight seems even more true.

Each person would contribute one word or name several of the things which oppose hope or shatter peace, the things we miss that seem so important to joy, the things that numb us to love, and put those words in the center of the home wreath and, if possible and willing, in the chat or comments of Zoom or livestream. Many of these may be similar each week – because the same things quench all four glowing points of our emotional compass.

First Sunday in Advent

Leader: In our homes / in our church and homes we gather around wreaths to pray our lost hopes, broken peace, limited joys, and love so hard to find and share, in this season of coronavirus. We affirm that our candles mean we call this season Advent when God’s light comes into the world and nothing can overcome it.

People / Second Leader (SL) reading for the people: We light the candle of hope in the face of... [for example: of Covid-19 wildfires, hurricanes, closed businesses, lost pollinators, missing singing ...]

Leader: God’s hope shines on hopelessness, and brightens the path toward peace.

People / SL Emmanuel, God be with us, in the week to come, lighting hope on the wick of our lives so that we may shine on our world. Amen

Second Sunday in Advent

Leader: In our homes / in our church and homes we gather around wreaths to pray our lost hopes,
broken peace, limited joys,
and love so hard to find and share
in this season of *coronavirus*.
We affirm that our candles mean
we call this season *Advent*
when God’s light comes into the world
and nothing can overcome it.
We light the candle of hope.

People / SL: We now light the candle of peace
in spite of:
[examples: gun violence, anger
post-election violence, dangerous homes
depression and addiction ...]

Leader: God’s peace illuminates the possibility
of reconciliation and healing
and brightens the path to joy.

People / SL: Emmanuel, God be with us, in the week to come,
lighting hope and peace on the wick of our lives
so that we may shine on our world. Amen

**Third Sunday in Advent**

Leader: In our homes / in our church and homes
we gather around wreaths
to pray our lost hopes,
broken peace, limited joys,
and love so hard to find and share
in this season of *coronavirus*.
We affirm that our candles mean
we call this season *Advent*,
when God’s light comes into the world
and nothing can overcome it.
We light the candles of hope and peace.

People / SL: We now light the candle of joy
in spite of missing so many things
we thought were essential to a merry Christmas
[Example: shopping, parties, funerals,
photos with Santa, Christmas visits, school sports,
chances to hug, memorial services]

Leader: God’s joy ignites embers under loss and sorrow
and brightens the path to love.
People / SL: Emmanuel, God be with us, in the week to come, lighting hope, peace and joy on the wick of our lives so that we may shine on our world with a simple smile, an unexpected laughter. Amen

Fourth Sunday in Advent

Leader: In our homes / in our church and homes we gather around wreaths to pray our lost hopes, broken peace, limited joys, and love so hard to find and share in this season of coronavirus. We affirm that our candles mean we call this season Advent, when God’s light comes into the world and nothing can overcome it. We light the candles of hope, peace, and joy.

People/ SL: We now light the candle of love even when many things dim our sparkling [Example: loneliness, racism, queer bashing, body shaming]

Leader: God’s love illuminates hatred and a compassionate heart and brightens the path to the birth of Christ.

People / SL: Emmanuel, God be with us in the week to come lighting hope, peace, joy and love on the wick of our lives, so that we may shine on our world your unconditional welcome to all. Amen.
Caroling in a Coronavirus Time

*It is the visit that is important for the recipient; it is the visiting that is important to the caroler*

Gather **outside of homes** of those shut-in, socially distanced for each other with carols on a portable device (yes, a boom box will work).

**Begin with a recording of someone singing**

And lift poster board lyrics (one poster for all, or, for more fun one for each line)

“We are not last year’s carolers that go from door to door, but we are friendly faces who let the music soar
With our cell phone (boom box) and smiles
we will cross pandemic miles ... 
So God bless you and send you A Happy New Year!
God send you a Happy New Year!

**Then play two or three carols.**

**Then share some Sign – you have learned something for them**

Two possibilities (multiple youtubes for this ... I like
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eGwRjOLF_jY for simplicity

**Silent Night (first verse only)**

*While playing on recording device*

Each person learn one phrase 1) Silent Night 2) Holy Night 3) All in Calm 4) All is Bright 5) ‘Round yon Virgin 6) Mother and Child 7) Holy Infant 8) so tender and mild
All learn: Sleep in heavenly peace, Sleep in heavenly peace.

**We wish you a Merry Christmas**

(all Sign together ... will not be perfect – go ahead and laugh. It models for the person being visited that it is OK to laugh.

We wish you a merry Christmas
We wish you a merry Christmas
We wish you a merry Christmas and a Happy New Year
Good tidings we bring to you and your kin
We wish you a merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!
Las Posadas, 2020

This brief script is suggested for a celebration of an adaptation of Las Posadas which is a Central American or Latin American custom to remind everyone about the essential homelessness of the Holy Family when they arrived in Bethlehem. This year we have lost Tomie dePaola, New Hampshire writer and artist, one of whose most famous books was “The Night of Las Posadas.”

In a traditional Las Posadas (which means “the Inns”), many doors would be knocked upon and the family would be rejected at each, but the homeowners would join the traveling caravan of the homeless to the next and next stop. The final stop would be the place where Mary and Joseph would be welcomed. Often that was the church.

This tradition is adapted this year to be part caroling and part pageant. This brief script assumes every house is the last house, though the social distancing band or couple may come to several doors. The innkeeper’s part may be divided among the number of people in the house.

Mary and Joseph and those who are with them arrive.

Knock on the door

Innkeeper: Who is here on this late night?
Joseph: We are poor travelers seeking a room.
Innkeeper: We have no room here. Stand back from the door. Go away.
Mary: But it is cold and we are tired. Please let us rest.
Innkeeper: Truly there is no room, none at any inn. Go back out to the country and sleep in the field.
Joseph: But my wife is pregnant and nearly ready to deliver her child.
Innkeeper: How did you get into such a situation?

Mary and Joseph start at the same time:

Mary: There was an angel.   Joseph: It was the census.
Innkeeper: One at a time!! Young woman, what did you say?

Mary: There was an angel who told me I would have a baby and that this child would be a Savior. Please let us stay so the Savior may be born under your roof.

Innkeeper: What kind of crazy story is this? You, young man, what do you have to say?

Joseph: My name is Joseph, and this is Mary my wife, and she is telling the truth, though when at first I learned she was pregnant, I was angry. I didn’t believe the story about the angel either, but that angel came to me while I was dreaming and told me truly this child, this Jesus, this Emmanuel, this Messiah, is of God.

Innkeeper: And you married her?

Joseph: Yes, and brought her to the town of my origins, Bethlehem, when all of us were sent onto the roads for Caesar’s census.

Innkeeper: That is amazing. Yet look at the Star. It is so bright – it is like a sign from God.

Mary: Can we stay here, kind Posadero? (Innkeeper)

Innkeeper: The Inn, my Posada, is full but if you wish, you can go to the stable, and shelter in place among my animals. You will be safe and I will send food and water to refresh you, for this is a strange and lonely night in a strange and lonely season.

Joseph: In is a strange and **holy** night ...

Mary: ... and this time is a strange but **holy** season.

Innkeeper: My blessing on your child.

Joseph: Our blessing on your home ...

Mary: I will ponder your kindness in my heart.

*They may go on to another house or stay to eat at an outdoor table something simple – a cookie or drink in the cold or with a firepit burning. They can visit one or several homes.*
Deciding to Take the Journey

Matthew 2: 1-9

Introduction … We begin Advent this morning, our four week preparation for the celebration of the birth of Jesus. We often call it a “journey” and so it reminds us that the ones who really were “journeying” to the west, detouring into Jerusalem for accurate if deadly information from Herod, probably began their trip much earlier. In our pageants they seem to pop up at the end and leave their gifts. As we begin Advent let’s go back to one way of imagining how they decided to make this journey. First, we know that there was a star-sighting, but nothing in the text says that all three of the magi saw it. There are many, many reasons why people go on journeys. Here’s a conversation between two of the magi – Melchior and Caspar – or rather Mel and Cass.

Mel: You know, Balthazar is just a little bit crazy.

Cass: Why, Mel, -- because he’s seen the star he’s been searching for all his life?

Mel: Well, Cass, don’t you think it is a bit … suspicious, that he finally saw that star when he was working here alone, and then conveniently it’s been cloudy for the last three nights?

Cass: Baldy can’t manipulate the clouds, Mel. You’re grouchy because you weren’t here when the big star rose. Remember how cranky I got when I had the flu and missed the lunar eclipse? We want to be in on special events because there are so many boring midnights.

We do star reading for the authorities, we see the signs and we share the news. That star – the special star – has always been Baldy’s side job, his dream. He read about it in the ancient prophecies and always believed it would rise during his life time. Of course, he stays watching till nearly morning light. Unlike us – we see what we need to see, do our charts, clock out, and go to bed.

Mel: Exactly. I certainly was sleeping. You know, after years of star-gazing they lose their beauty for me. Just a sky full of tiny dots of light. It’s like a cook who doesn’t much care about eating a fancy feast. When I was young I could look at the sky through our telescopes and see the wonders of God’s creation and imagine all the other places of glory. Even when I would walk under the night sky just watching with my naked eyes, I saw infinite beauty. Now … well, it’s just a job.

Cass: That sense of amazement and joy has never changed for Baldy, you know. Old as he is – and he is the oldest of us and surely the most ready to retire – he still looks up at the heavens as full of wonder and expectation as any child.

You know he’s packing, gathering camels and traveling companions, buying up provisions for a long trip. He is getting ready to follow that amazing star he told the very next time there is a clear sky.
Mel: Of course he is. He’s going to follow some new star to a King, born in the west, born to another faith altogether, born to bring light to the world. Well, as far as my reality-eyes see there’s nothing but Roman Empire West of us and they may talk about bringing Pax Romana to the rest of the actual world, but it feels more like War Romana.

Cass: He’s an old man, Baldy, the Ultimate Wise Man – too old to go alone.

Mel: Baldy has servants and he can pay a whole caravan to escort him. He has gold, lots of gold.

Cass: It’s not the same going with people you hire. It’s not the same as going with a friend. Haven’t you ever wanted someone to come with you when followed a dream?

Mel: You are not considering it, are you? Remember you and I have not even seen this star of wonder, star of might, star with royal beauty bright.

Cass: When you were young, Mel, you didn’t need to see the end of something all laid out plain and clear in order to go on an adventure. In fact, you were always the risk-taker one of us, following your dreams, writing poetry, trying to tinker with new inventions. You were the living idea of a magi – smart, full of insight and daring.

Mel: Yes, and what did that get me? Late middle age, well or early … never mind. Do you know what my kids got together and bought me for the Naw-ruz holiday last year. “Happy New Year, Dad, here’s a bottle of myrrh.”

Cass: Expensive gift … myrrh.

Mel: And the most common use is to prepare someone for burial. Really!!!! What about some slippers – I would love sky blue satin curled tip slippers – you know the ones that make you look like a genie coming out of a bottle. A gift of myrrh means they think that I already have one foot in the grave.

Cass: They love you.

Mel: They think I’m about to die … to take the last adventure.

Cass: You could re-gift it.

Mel: And insult someone else? If I gave it to anyone “of a certain” age – it would seem like I thought they were over the hill or under-ground. The only person who could receive a bottle of myrrh without being offended would be a baby. … Come to think of it, that might be a little strange, too.

Cass: Well, bring it with you.

Mel: Excuse me? Bring it with me?
Cass: Yes, bring it with you on our journey west. I know you’ll come with us.

Mel: You are really considering it. Why?

Cass: Well, first there is that reading from the Jewish prophet Isaiah.

Mel: I love Isaiah. Of all the writers of all the faiths in the world his are the most beautiful words. Do you remember …

“Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.
… A voice cries out:
‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.”

Cass: Great travel words those. Let’s hold on to them for when our blisters are big and our camels are cranky! but those are not the ones I was remembering.

Mel: How about: “Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.”

Cass: That’s it – that’s what I will bring! Frankincense. I’ve got that incredible frankincense and it’s small it won’t be much extra to carry but it is a gift worthy of any king we meet, like Herod a trumped-up monarch if I’ve ever heard of one, or perhaps someone even wiser and kinder and with more potential to be a true king.

Mel: We have to bring a gift?

Cass: You see, you are coming. I knew you would.

Mel: You did huh? Glad I am so unsurprising.

Cass: You, Mel, will always go on an adventure. You will always take on a risk or a hope. You are the kind of “wise” that knows that a hypothesis is the only way to learn anything – not memorizing last year’s knowledge. And Baldy has the greatest hypothesis of all – if we follow a star, we will discover a king.
Mel: What about you, my friend? It could be risky for a woman magi to trek across the desert. Full of robbers. Sunburn to ruin your complexion. What would make you want to leave home anyway?

Cass: He’s my friend, Mel. I can’t let him go alone and I can’t let him go with just you – you will be off on every side adventure there is. I can hear you now ... “Oh, I think I see an oasis. Won’t take but a day or two. Or ... Hey I hear there is a discount on the Sphinx – only a couple hundred miles out of our way. Poor Baldy’s King would be a teenager if I left him to you.

Mel: Still it’s dangerous.

Cass: I’ll disguise myself as a man. You see, Mel, it doesn’t matter why a person goes on a journey. It matters only that we’re willing to go. Most of us only know what we were looking for all along when we find it.

Mel: Even Baldy?

Cass: Even Baldy.

Mel: What will he say when he sees you dressed as a man? He’ll disapprove.

Cass: Not when I volunteer to cook.

Mel: So Cass, what was the Isaiah scripture you meant?

Cass: This one:
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 Counsellor, Mighty God,
   Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.]

Mel: Guess I had better pack.
**Elsa Cook Resources (one week’s gathering)** Remember that you don't need to bend over backwards to offer me credit. I'm doing this as a gift to your many talents, dear pastor.

From her Blog Cooking with Elsa [https://cookingwithelsa.org/](https://cookingwithelsa.org/)

My dear clergy friends trying to curate a tech extravaganza each week have shared that getting content from the talents within the congregation is hard. It's harder than the editing, sometimes. I don't know how much I can help with that but I’m gonna try.

If your talents are like mine, you rely with great faith and confidence in the musical talents in your congregation. Many of you have wonderfully talented choir directors and music ministers who are innovating the crap out of this moment, but even they are tired. *(Of course, they are. We all are.)* Here are a few musical ingredients to zest up your worship:

- Sanctified Art recently shared a [stewardship soundtrack](https://cookingwithelsa.org/) with lots of ideas around music for the stewardship season (whether or not you are using their curated resource.) From that list, I met some new talents including [Liz Vice](https://cookingwithelsa.org/) and [Ellie Holcomb](https://cookingwithelsa.org/).
- From Liz Vice, I might suggest her recording of [This Land Was Made for You and Me](https://cookingwithelsa.org/) for however your congregation might celebrate Thanksgiving this year. Buy and stream it [here](https://cookingwithelsa.org/). You might also consider her [Refugee King](https://cookingwithelsa.org/) for your Advent and Christmas planning.
- Ellie Holcomb's [Constellations](https://cookingwithelsa.org/) might just be lovely for Advent. Or at least, it contains my angst. The Many offers another beautiful advent hymn with [Waiting for You](https://cookingwithelsa.org/). Sheet music can be found [here](https://cookingwithelsa.org/).
- I also love [How Much Longer?](https://cookingwithelsa.org/) from the Common Hymnal.
- You might find also some musical inspiration for Christmas Eve from Engage Worship's [Alternative Christmas Playlist](https://cookingwithelsa.org/).

For those that are just tired of preaching, or worship planning, I hoped to provide some complete worship experiences that you might use as your inspiration and solace. Here are a few for All Saints:

- Many of you are already huge fans of Marcia McFee's Worship Design Studio, but if you missed it: she recently shared a [liturgy for Blue Christmas](https://cookingwithelsa.org/) that she suggested could be easily adapted for All Saints Sunday.
- You might also want to be ready to have your talented musicians join in singing [We Grieve the Many Thousands](https://cookingwithelsa.org/) by Carolyn Winfrey Gillette. She also created a hymn for when we hit 200,000 but I fear that number will no longer be relevant in the beginning of November.
- Though I'm completely and totally uncertain that this would work in a screen-based format, I did write a full liturgy for [Silent Prayers for All Saints Day](https://cookingwithelsa.org/).

Advent might not include any preaching but meditative wonder as you watch [these paintings evolve over four Sundays](https://cookingwithelsa.org/). I might write a liturgy around these. I like them so much. While not a full liturgy, it seems that if ever there was a year for this [Advent Wreath Candlelighting](https://cookingwithelsa.org/), this would be the year. I also like [this one](https://cookingwithelsa.org/). If you are eager to sing carols in Advent but might embrace the weirdness of this year, you might choose these [Advent lyrics](https://cookingwithelsa.org/) authored by Maren Tirabassi among others. Or you use these lovely [Advent Prayer Stations](https://cookingwithelsa.org/), written by Erica Schemper. The worship leader on camera would set up the table and worship bags could be delivered to members with supplies needed for the stations. Another possibility...
that is more outside the box is to follow the four Sundays with Lectio Divina with Mary. I've already referenced this digital Christmas Pageant but here is another unique idea for a pageant which may or may not take place in the context of worship. If you are looking for something to offer families (or offer your own family) as Advent approaches, Traci Smith offers some great ideas for advent calendars. I know of several churches that have already ordered copies of her new book to offer to families. If you do order 10 or more copies, be sure to sign up for this special offering too.

For Christmas Eve, Katherine Hawker shares this Lessons and Carols focused on words from the Iona Community. Carolyn Brown offers this Family Friendly Lessons and Carols. It follows what will feel very familiar but may not translate to what you've started to curate online. You could also mix up these readings with Poetry for Lessons and Carols -- a list I update each year. In fact, I still need to update it form the gems I found last year. It seems like there could be something other than the traditional Lessons and Carols for Christmas Eve and perhaps this lovely service could be saved for the third day of Christmas (otherwise known as Sunday December 27). And yet, I think we will be yearning for a bit of nostalgia. I'm wondering how that can be done without preaching. Rev. Mindi believes in letting the story be told on Christmas Eve. She doesn't preach and so her resources for both Advent and Christmas that may also inspire.

I know there are more wonders that will emerge in the next few weeks and I'll be sure to link to those that I find helpful. You can also be sure to check my blog for Advent liturgies, Blue Christmas and at least one Christmas Eve service, in addition to the weekly pandemic prayers I've been offering. Remember that you don't need to bend over backwards to offer me credit. I'm doing this as a gift to your many talents, dear pastor.
When the carols of choirs are stilled,  
when so many dear ones are gone  
it seems like the stars  
have blinked their tears into darkness,  
when the year has kept so many home  
and endangered the homes  
of so many others,  
when the shepherds of the year  
are health care workers,  
and, like those flock-keepers long ago,  
essential but poorly-honored workers,  
the work of Advent begins:  
to find the grieving, the fearful, the lost,  
to heal those broken in spirit  
with the story of an unexpected hope  
in another time of great danger,  
to feed, clothe, shelter, employ,  
those financially insecure,  
to release the prisoner – especially those  
in immigration detention,  
to rebuild all the nations,  
because the epiphany is  
that gifts come  
not out of our own chimneys  
but from strangers who live far away,  
to become stable-makers that shelter  
peace, health, wisdom  
and care for the earth itself,  
to sing the carols in our homes  
and teach the words and maybe one tune  
to someone, perhaps a child,  
who longs for a new harmony.