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Loss, Healing, and Hope: A “Blue Christmas” Service

For the most part, Christmas is a time of celebration and joy. For many, however, this is a difficult time of year. Many people are carrying significant weights: grief, loss, depression, anxiety, financial stress, unemployment, uncertainty, aging parents, sick children, recent diagnoses, unknown illnesses. The public tone of the season does not resonate with many people’s private experience.

The shape of worship offered here begins by gathering in honesty about grief, hearing the consolation found in God’s presence and love, and departing with the joy that comes from memory and a sense of shared peace.

The presider will want to create a comforting space and time, in which people can make choices about the extent to which they participate. For example, the congregation should have opportunities to sing familiar carols, but also to hear music in which they do not have to participate. Solo voices, especially with uncomplicated accompaniments, are most helpful in establishing an intimate and reassuring space. Lowered lighting, while still remaining safe, also helps establish a warm and inviting environment.

Thankfully, and especially in worship, music opens up pathways of the spirit that ordinary words cannot. Familiar carols can reinforce the message of prayers, scriptures, and reflections that precede or follow singing. The instruments, where possible, should be acoustic (i.e., not amplified). (In the congregation I serve, we are fortunate to have a local harpist who joins us each year for this service.) The congregation might also remain seated for some of the carols, where the object of singing together is not so much to produce a full sound, but to foster reflection.

Gathering as God’s People

Before worship begins, instrumental music played capably and gently creates an inviting atmosphere in which congregants can enter—spiritually and emotionally—at their own pace. The Call to Worship and Prayer of Approach may be combined. There are also excellent Christmas collects in Voices United (e.g., VU 63, 66).

Prelude

“The Lark Ascending,” or a Christmas carol (harp, flute, piano, or acoustic guitar)

Greeting and Call to Worship

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God,
and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

And also with you.

All around us, lights are lit and carols play.

The season heaps joy upon us.

Yet, we who come here, we carry more than joy;
we carry loss, worry, grief and pain.

We come weary, seeking rest from expectations.
We also seek a holy presence to be with us.

We come to this place, by the resilient grace of God:
love that never lets go.

Carol: O Little Town of Bethlehem (VU 64)

Prayer of Approach

We gather this night, to remember...
those who have touched our lives,
glad memories and happy stories,
and love that we hold dear.

We name those who have been life itself to us.

We gather in the name of Jesus,
vulnerable as an infant,
joyful and happy as a youth,
wise and caring as an adult.

**We gather in the presence of God,
who brings life and light to all.**

All life is precious in God’s sight.
No one is ever alone or forgotten.

Come, let us gather in the Spirit of hope and peace.
We worship, in the name of joy and love. Amen.

Carol: It Came Upon the Midnight Clear (VU 44)

Options: Sheep Fast Asleep (VU 52); In the Bleak Midwinter (VU 55)

Listening for God’s Promise

This is an opportunity to preach pastorally to people who are grieving, and who are longing to hear of God’s love. What follows is an option to do something different, if desired. In each of three sections—Loss, Healing, and Hope—a passage of scripture speaks to the theme of that section. Following scripture, a prayer is offered that elaborates on scripture and connects it with our lives. At the end of each section, one verse of the hymn “Those Hearts That We Have Treasured” (VU 494) reinforces the theme and offers a lilting melody to join in singing, or to reflect.

Losing One We Love

Isaiah 40:1, 6–8

Prayer

Holy One, you are with us in times of trouble and in times of peace;
in times of sorrow and times of joy.
When we are unsure of how to continue living and loving,
your Spirit intervenes with sighs too deep for words.
Speak for us now, Loving God.
Comfort us with your abiding peace... (*silence*)

Verse Those Hearts That We Have Treasured (VU 494, v. 1)

Healing and Memory

Psalm 139:7–12

Prayer

God of all, when we feel alone, you draw nearer;
when we lose our footing, you guide us toward a good path.
Through the ages, you have promised to be a comfort to your people,
and you call us to be a comfort to others.
In all our living, may we never lose the memory
of our most cherished relationships,
and may we feel the courage and strength you offer to us
through those who surround us... *(silence)*

Verse Those Hearts That We Have Treasured (VU 494, v. 2)

Living with Hope and Love

John 14:1–4, 18–19

Prayer

God of hope and joy, you prepare our hearts for renewal.
You till the soil of our lives and nurture small shoots of possibility.
Even when we are unsure, you repeat your promise:
I will never leave you.
Open us, Holy One, to your promise.
Hold us in your care.
Strengthen us for your future.
Guide us in anticipation and faith... *(silence)*

Verse Those Hearts That We Have Treasured (VU 494, v. 3)

At this point, it is helpful to hear a meditative piece of music. “I Wonder as I Wander” has a haunting, Appalachian melody and is best sung a cappella (without accompaniment). The option “Of the Father’s Love Begotten” is based on plainchant, so can also be sung a cappella, or with light accompaniment. In different ways, both of these pieces reinforce God’s presence and offer a sense of reassurance. They are also beautiful and intimate.

Solo: I Wonder, As I Wander (www.hymnary.org/text/i_wonder_as_i_wander_out_under_the_sky)

Option: Of the Father’s Love Begotten (VU 61)

Remembering in Hope

In many congregations, the Blue Christmas service is either combined with or has become a Tree of Memories service, where the lights of a memorial tree are lit in memory of loved ones. This is usually preceded by reading the names of those people we wish to remember, and would be best done with gentle accompaniment supporting the voices reading names. In the church I serve, we also light candles, on the communion table, for those in the congregation who have died in the past year.

An alternative/addition to this tradition is the Ceremony of Commemoration below, during which candles are lit (again, on the communion table) for people and relationships we are remembering in worship.

Reading of Names or

Ceremony of Commemoration

We light a candle in memory of those who gave us birth,
who nurtured us, offered love, and cherished us.

**We remember mothers and fathers,
guardians and grandparents,
and all our family through the ages.**

We light a candle in memory of those
who have been joined to us in the great circle of family.

**We remember sisters and brothers,
aunts, uncles, and cousins,
those near to us and far away.**

We light a candle in memory of those who have left us
before we expected, those we hold dear,
and with whom we still walk in our dreams.

**We remember children and grandchildren,
those who leaped within the womb
and who danced upon the earth.**

We light a candle in memory of those whom we came to know through the eyes of love.
We hold sacred the faces and memories of years past,
of those who brightened our days and lit up our lives.

**We remember husbands and wives,
dearest loves and closest friends,
who changed our lives forever.**

We light a candle in memory of those who shared in our lives
in many ways, who worked with us
and made our lives more enjoyable.

We remember friends and neighbours.

We light a candle for those we do not know, O God,
who, like us, have suffered loss, who live with grief,
who long for peace and justice,
who long for friendship and healing.

We remember your people, of every time and place.

Finally, we leave one candle unlit,
mindful of the great truth of this life,
that in the fullness of time we, too,
will join our loved ones in a realm without sorrow and pain,
in the company of Unending Love.

**For these and all your children, we give thanks
for life, hope and courage. Amen.**

(Lighting of Memorial Tree)

Going in Peace

In many congregations, it is a tradition on Christmas Eve to conclude by lighting candles and singing Silent Night. This is a good option for this service, too, because it allows people who may have arrived alone to feel some connection with those around them. The light is passed from person to person, and people’s courage is cheered by a familiar carol.

The reassurance of candlelight is enhanced by a darkened sanctuary. An acoustic guitar and solo voice to lead the singing would be helpful and pleasant. The flame of the Christ candle is the source for tapers or small candles that could have been handed out at the beginning of the service.

Sharing Christ’s Light

Carol: Silent Night (VU 67)

Benediction