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## SERMON PLANNING GUIDE // OVERVIEW

As you and your congregation enter a very busy personal season, the church calendar kicks off a brand new year. Because birth is its own incredible kind of beginning, we might expect the new year to begin with the birth of Jesus. However, instead of celebrating the birth of Christ right away, we celebrate that his birth is coming. As personal calendars fill up with celebrations and obligations, the church calendar is filled with anticipation and hope.

We pray that these Sermon Starters are a helpful resource to you this Advent, as you guide your congregation in making way for the Messiah.

*Note: In addition to the four Sundays of Advent, we have also included an optional sermon starter as well as liturgy for a Blue Christmas service. The suggested date is December 21 but this could be used any time you choose to hold this type of worship experience to honor the range of emotions and personal experiences of the Advent and Christmas seasons.*

# #PICTUREADVENT 2017 SERMON PLANNING GUIDE WRITTEN BY BETH DEMME

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## WEEK ONE: HOPE CANDLE // #AWAKEN

December 3, 2017

**Lectionary Scriptures: Isaiah 64:1-9; Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37**

Read today's Old Testament texts from the point of view of someone who doesn't know "the rest of the story." Read them as if you did not know of Jesus' birth.

It's like watching an action packed movie with an unknown or uncertain ending. The Isaiah passage and Psalm 80 beg for God's presence in the world to be more manifest, to #awaken. In Isaiah we read, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down." The Psalmist says, "Stir up your might, and come to save us!" The authors of these passages long for a savior.

We know the longing of these Old Testament passages is fulfilled by the birth of Jesus, but we also recognize we feel our own deep need for a savior still today.

Jesus has come, but God's kingdom on earth is not yet fully realized. The New Testament passages tell us our anticipation is not wasted. In Paul's letter to the Corinthians, he writes that we "wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 1:7). The Gospel lesson tells us to be like those who wait with vigilance for someone important to return home. "Keep awake!" it says (Mark 13:37).

We yearn for more of God's presence in the life of our nation, our church, our family, and perhaps most of all in ourselves. These biblical passages remind us to have hope — our yearnings will not be wasted. We can take comfort and find inspiration in the hope that God will find a way to break through in our nation, our church, our family, and in ourselves.

Advent is an opportunity to immerse ourselves in hope. Week by week we can wade in a little deeper until we are fully immersed in the realization of our hope in the birth of Jesus.

Where do you most long to see hope restored? How is your congregation bringing hope to the community? Explore how hope can be "borrowed" — how your hope inspires your congregation's hope (and vice versa) and how your community depends on your congregation's hopefulness. What does it look like when hope is absent, when we have failed to "keep awake"?

### **Suggested Benediction:**

*Keep awake! Go from here knowing  
the hope of God the Father, Son,  
and Holy Spirit is being poured out  
on you and through you.*

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## WEEK TWO: PEACE CANDLE // #WATER

December 10, 2017

**Lectionary Scriptures:** Isaiah 40:1-11; Psalm 85:1-2,8-13; 2 Peter 3:8-15a; Mark 1:1-8

This week's scriptures point to making a pathway for peace in the midst of struggle (Isaiah 40:3, Psalm 85:13, Mark 1:3). As one prayer puts it, "As #water is restless until it reaches its level, so the soul has not peace until it rests in God" (Sudar Singh, UMH 423).

As a pastor this might resonate with you personally during this busy season. You may find yourself struggling with the twin demands of a busy calendar and a soul that longs for time to connect deeply with God. Peace in the midst of struggle will also resonate with your congregation, some of whom may feel guilt and shame that they cannot "give" more this Christmas. They may wish to give their children or grandchildren more "stuff" as a way to show their love. They may even think that's what Christmas is all about (though they are unlikely to admit it to you, or even to themselves).

Last week we began to prepare our hopeful hearts. This week, we add a layer of peacefulness to our hope. Peacefulness that is welcome, and yet elusive, during this busy season.

The Isaiah passage begins with God saying "Comfort, O comfort my people." Even in a season of joy, like Christmas, people can disconnect from the source of true comfort. The busy-ness of the season can dull our senses to God's abiding presence. Isaiah speaks metaphorically about the leveling of valleys and mountains. Walking through life can feel like walking on uneven terrain. God's love and glory give us perspective to make mole-hills out of mountains, instead of the other way around. God is with us in every valley, up and down over every mountain.

The Isaiah passage also speaks of our finitude. "All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. ... The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever." (Isaiah 40:6b, 8) It's helpful to remember that we have limits, especially during a busy season like Advent when we are trying to do more, more, more. It can seem like there is always one more present to buy, one more event to attend, or one more task to get our home ready. God is the ultimate caretaker. He will feed, gather, carry, and lead us. (Isaiah 40:11)

God's peace comes to us even in the midst of our busy journey and our rocky path.

Explore how you have seen God's comfort at work on three scales: macro (world), meso (community or congregation), and micro (in yourself).

### **Suggested Benediction:**

*May your path this week be full of God's peace.*

*May your journey this week be ripe with Christ's love.*

*May your rough places be smoothed by the fullness of the Holy Spirit.*

*May your soul be like still water, at rest in God. Amen.*

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## WEEK THREE: LOVE CANDLE // #BAPTISM

December 17, 2017

**Lectionary Scriptures: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Psalm 126; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8, 19-28**

We began two weeks ago by laying the groundwork for hope. We then acknowledged the need for God's comfort along our path, adding a layer of peace. This week we add love.

In Isaiah 61, the prophet yearns to share the love of God with the people of Israel. The prophet says God has sent him to "give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning" (Isaiah 61:3). The yearning for God's love culminates in verse 10 with a wedding-day scene, a celebration of love. Then in Psalm 126 we read of a dream come true, of a future celebration when temporary tears are replaced with shouts of joy. 1 Thessalonians encourages us to pray without ceasing because the God of peace will sanctify us with his love. Finally, the Gospel lesson introduces John the Baptist, the voice in the wilderness telling us our Advent wait is nearly over.

As we think about God's love this week, it's helpful to recognize that John the Baptist doesn't declare, "here, I have the answer!" Or even, "look within yourself for the answer." Instead, John says, "get ready to receive."

We often hear, and perhaps say, during this season, "it is more blessed to give than to receive." Jesus even said so (Acts 20:35). In keeping with this adage, people tend to be especially generous leading up to Christmas. Your church may have participated in buying gifts for children unlikely to receive much. Or perhaps you gathered food for needy families. Those acts of generosity are done in love, but they are only an illustration of the love that comes to us at Christmas, the love we prepare ourselves to receive.

At Christmas we are the ultimate recipients. Will Willimon says "we are better givers than getters." We like to give because receiving requires humility; we may even feel like the giver has something over us. (Think about how it feels when a neighbor unexpectedly brings you a Christmas gift and you have nothing to offer in return.) The Christmas story, however, "is not about how blessed it is to be givers but how essential it is to see ourselves as recipients." God's love is coming in a tangible, unexpected way. Are we ready to receive? Are we willing to humble ourselves and acknowledge how much we need God's saving grace? We manage and control so many details at Christmas we can slip into a mindset that says, "I've got this. I don't need God." Explore the irony of that happening at Christmas, a season of receiving.

### **Suggested Benediction:**

*Be givers and getters. Make haste to be kind and swift to receive and share Christ's holy and perfect love.*

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## BLUE CHRISTMAS, DECEMBER 21, 2017 // #GENERATIONS

Christmas is an incredibly joy-filled time ... for most people. But in the midst of great joy, there can be hidden pain. Consider offering a Blue Christmas service this year for people in your community. This is an opportunity to pause and acknowledge that Christmas isn't always merry. Sometimes Christmas reminds us of what we've lost instead of encouraging us to look forward. There are people in your midst who are grieving, lonely, sad, or hurting. The joy the world seems to share every December can heighten those feelings. We suggest offering this service on the longest night of the year, December 21st, in recognition that in seasons of sadness the nights are indeed long.

### **Suggested Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18**

Consider inviting a member of the congregation to read a poem about loss. Encourage an artist in your congregation to create a special painting for the altar. Get your worship arts team to fill the sanctuary with candles and spaces for reflection and prayer.

Use the Advent Wreath, but offer the 4 candles with alternative meanings based on the United Methodist Book of Worship at page 548. Each Leader stanza can be read by a different person, or by the same person. The respective candle can be lit when the congregation offers their response.

L: We light the candle of remembrance. Everliving God, this Christmas season has revived in us memories of loved ones who are no more. What happiness we shared when they walked among us. What joy, when, loving and being loved, we lived our lives together. [Light Candle 1]

C: Their memory is a blessing for ever.

L: Next, we light the candle of longing. Months or years may have passed, and still we feel near to them. Though the bitter grief has softened, a duller pain abides; for the place where once they stood is empty now. The links of life are broken, but the links of love and longing cannot break. [Light Candle 2]

C: Their souls are bound up in ours for ever.

L: Next, we light the candle of gratitude for what was and what is. We see our loved ones now with the eye of memory, their faults forgiven, their virtues grown larger. So does goodness live, and weakness fade from sight. We remember them with gratitude and bless their names. We also acknowledge Lord that you have not forgotten us. In our loneliness, our sadness, our fear and confusion, Lord you choose to walk with us and comfort us. [Light Candle 3]

C: They are not forgotten. We are not forgotten.

L: Finally, we light the candle of gratitude for what will be. We give you thanks that they now live and reign with you. As a great crowd of witnesses, they surround us with their blessings, and offer you hymns of praise and thanksgiving. [Light Candle 4]

C: They are alive in you for ever more. Amen.

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If you want to design your Blue Christmas service to address more than grief, build the Advent Wreath portion of your service around these alternative candle meanings:

- Candle 1— To remember those we have loved and lost. Give time for the congregation to silently call those loved ones to mind, remembering their smile, their voice, the way it felt to be near them.
- Candle 2— To redeem the pain of our losses. This can be grief over a lost loved one, but you can also invite people to acknowledge the pain of other kinds of endings (divorce, unemployment, even the loss of health).
- Candle 3— To remember ourselves and honor our feelings of disbelief, anger, and fear. To give thanks to all of those who have helped us as we wrestled with those feelings.
- Candle 4 — To mark our hope and the source of our hope, the God of resurrection.

### **Suggested Benediction:**

*(Romans 15:13) May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

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## WEEK FOUR: JOY CANDLE // #CHILD

December 24, 2017

**Lectionary Scriptures: 2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Luke 1:46b-55; Romans 16:25-27; Luke 1:36-38**

Today is a day of great anticipation. As a #child, is there any day in the entire year that has more anticipation than Christmas Eve? We can build on that anticipation as the culmination of our Advent preparation. Our Advent journey began with hope, then we sought God's peace and love. Today we round out our journey with joy.

Mary's joy pours out of her in the beautiful Magnificat we read in Luke 1. Mary is with her cousin Elizabeth. As the women celebrate their pregnancies, Mary's love of God overflows with a beautiful song. Does our joy for God pour from us? Does your soul magnify the Lord and your spirit rejoice in your Savior? Mary's joy comes because she completely opens herself to God. This can be scary for us! Opening completely to God requires self-awareness and a level of vulnerability that does not come naturally to most of us.

Perhaps we are more like King David in today's lesson from 2 Samuel. David wants to build a house for God. On the one hand, David wants to honor God. On the other hand, David wants to know where God is. Perhaps David even wants to exert some control on God's location. But God explains that he doesn't live in a tent, or even a grand palace. Instead, God lives in David and will continue to live in David's descendants. In other words, God lives in people.

This takes on an even deeper meaning with Mary's Annunciation. The angel Gabriel tells Mary, "nothing will be impossible with God." Mary says yes to God, despite the potentially high personal costs (her engagement, her reputation, her future). Mary not only says "yes" she sings about the blessing of saying yes.

With Mary's yes, God became incarnate—more tangible than anyone ever imagined. Our joy is complete in Christ and our soul sings as Mary sang. We celebrate our hope, peace, love and joy, but let's not forget, Advent is the beginning of the year. O Come, O Come Emmanuel, tonight and every night. O Come, O Come Emmanuel into my heart, and every heart.

Birth is its own incredible kind of beginning. Christ is born and now we can celebrate the birth of rebirth; the birth of eternal love.

### **Suggested Benediction:**

*Go forth on this holy, silent night.*

*Go forth in hope, peace, love, and joy.*

*Welcome our Emmanuel into your home, your heart, and your soul. Amen.*