

## **A Service of Scripture, Carols, and Poems for the New Year**

inspired by a service originally crafted as a custom liturgy request and donated to the liturgy library of enflashed by Collegiate UMC in Ames, IA

Good morning! Welcome to 2023! I am Rev. Kelley Becker, the senior minister of Disciples Christian Church. It is my privilege to welcome you to worship on this, the first day of a brand-new year. This morning, we will light the candles in the Advent wreath for the last time until Advent begins again, and as we do, we will reflect once again on the themes of hope, peace, joy, and love. We are going to ease into the new year as we sing some of our favorite carols and remember times in 2022 when life felt easy and fun and the times when it definitely did not. And we will look forward to 2023 as we welcome the new year full of things that have never been. I am glad you are here.

Will you pray with me:

Spirit of Love,

We welcome you.

We celebrate your coming to sit with us.

And we remember the ways you have been a faithful friend and presence since the beginning.

It was you who wove all life together.

Your love is painted across all of creation.

Throughout history, over and over again, you have taken on flesh,

in the ordinary and the extraordinary,

in the vulnerability of infants,

the fierce proclamations of prophets, and

the enduring hope of those who persevere under evil's threats.

Where there is grief, where there is holy rage,

where there is fear or sacred imagination growing,

you have been and will always be there.

Bless our time together, as we remember again the still-unfolding story of your love:

A love that comes to dwell among us.

A love that surprises and disrupts.

A love that reveals the way of liberation.

May it be so among us. Amen.

**Reader 1:** On the Sundays in Advent, which lead to Christmas, we lit a new candle in the Advent wreath each week. This morning, we will light them for the last time until next Advent.

The first candle symbolizes hope:

The hope of God is honest. It names forthrightly the struggles of our shared lives – the fear and suffering that make hope both difficult and necessary. It reaches to us in the places that are bare, vulnerable, tender, and tired. And hope says hang on. Keep on. Press on with purpose. What feels impossible can become possible when we act on our hope. As we light this candle, we reflect on all the big and small ways hope has revealed itself to us this year.

**(light purple hope candle)**

Poet, Nayyirah Waheed, wrote this poem about hope:

“i don’t pay attention to the  
world ending.  
it has ended for me  
many times  
and began again in the morning.”

God’s people have kept hope alive for generations. Here these words from the Gospel of Luke 4:16-21:

When Jesus came to Nazareth, where he had grown up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his regular practice. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. Jesus unrolled the scroll and found where it was written:

“The Spirit of God is upon me, because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. God has sent me to proclaim release to those held captive, and restoration to those who are broken open, and let the oppressed go free, to proclaim liberation, and jubilee.”

And Jesus rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then Jesus began to say to them, “Today, with your witness, this scripture has been fulfilled.”

**#144 CH O Little Town of Bethlehem**

**Reader 2:** The second candle symbolizes peace:

Peace is the gift of God that follows practicing care for each other and living with moral integrity. Prophets bear testimony to the barriers of peace among us. They chant faithfully in response to histories and present realities of racist violence, “no justice, no peace!” They echo the scriptures calling for justice and peace to rise and kiss. As we light this candle, we take a moment to reflect on injustice that keeps people and communities from resting into the peace of God. Let it remind us to be peacemakers in the coming year.

**(light purple peace candle)**

This is an excerpt from a poem about peace written by Joy Harjo:

Call upon the help of those who love you. These helpers take many forms: animal, element, bird, angel, saint, stone, or ancestor.

Call your spirit back. It may be caught in corners and creases of shame, judgment, and human abuse.

You must call in a way that your spirit will want to return.

Speak to it as you would to a beloved child.

Welcome your spirit back from its wandering. It may return in pieces, in tatters.

Gather them together. They will be happy to be found after being lost for so long.

Your spirit will need to sleep awhile after it is bathed and given clean clothes...

Then, you must do this: help the next person find their way through the dark.

In the book of Isaiah, the prophet casts a vision for peace:

The wolf shall live in peace with the lamb,  
the leopard shall lie down with the newborn goat,  
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 viper’s nest,  
and the weaned child shall put her hand on the adder’s den.

They who can kill so easily will not hurt or destroy any life;  
for the earth will overflow with Divine Wisdom,  
as the waters saturate the sea.

## **#153 CH It Came Upon a Midnight Clear**

**Reader 3:** The third candle symbolizes joy:

Joy does not keep us from grief or hide the world's pain away. It brings its own offerings of delight, beauty, laughter, and sits them beside sorrows. Joy is the eternal abundance of small miracles that tether us to God's aliveness, even when death surrounds. As we light this candle of joy, we reflect on the sources of plenty in our lives – the feasts of holy abundance that sustain our spirits.

**(light pink joy candle)**

Poet Mary Oliver wrote this about joy:

If you suddenly and unexpectedly feel joy, don't hesitate. Give in to it. There are plenty of lives and whole towns destroyed or about to be. We are not wise, and not very often kind. And much can never be redeemed. Still, life has some possibility left. Perhaps this is its way of fighting back, that sometimes something happens better than all the riches or power in the world. It could be anything, but very likely you notice it in the instant when love begins. Anyway, that's often the case. Anyway, whatever it is, don't be afraid of its plenty. Joy is not made to be a crumb."

In the Gospel of Luke, two women experience the joy of being part of what God is birthing in the world:

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Spirit, and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you, and blessed is the life you are bearing forth. And why is this happening to me, that the mother of the Anointed One comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believes that the possibilities whispered by Spirit would come to be."

## **#143 CH Joy to the World**

**Reader 4:** The fourth candle symbolizes love:

The greatest commandment – the one through which everything else must be interpreted: Love invites us, challenges us, changes us. Love is intimate and love is collective – it seeks a world of flourishing, within and without, for all life. As we light this candle, we reflect on the barriers that keep us from living out our full capacity to love and celebrate the freedom God has given us to break down those barriers together.

**(light the purple love candle)**

A lot has been written about love. Poet Rupi Kaur wrote this:

most importantly love  
like it's the only thing you know how  
at the end of the day all this  
means nothing  
this page  
where you're sitting  
your degree  
your job  
the money  
nothing even matters  
except love and human connection  
who you loved  
and how deeply you loved them  
how you touched the people around you  
and how much you gave them

Mary sings of God's love which extends to all people in all times and places:

"My soul magnifies God,  
and my spirit rejoices in our Creator,  
for God has looked with favor on me, one who has faced disrespect and  
degradation.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;  
for the Divine has done great things through me,  
and holy is God's name.

God's mercy is for those who know awe, and joy,  
from generation to generation.

God's power has scattered the oppressive ones, perpetuating injustice.  
God has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;  
God has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty.  
God has helped us, God's people, in  
remembrance of God's merciful promise—  
a promise made to our ancestors, and extended to us,  
and to those who will come after us, forever."

### **#163 CH Infant Holy, Infant Lowly**

**Reader 5:** The center candle is the Christ candle:

The incarnation of God comes to us in the most surprising of ways and places.  
Unsettling the expectations of the powerful and breaking wide open the hopes of  
the weary, salvation is born among us. As we light the Christ candle, we reflect on  
our presumptions about God, the world, ourselves, and each other, and open to  
the mysterious and scandalous way of Love enfleshed.

**(light the Christ candle)**

This poem was written by Padraig O' Tuama:

And I said to him  
Are there questions to all of this?  
And he said  
The answer is in a story  
and the story is being told.  
And I said  
But there is so much pain  
And she answered, plainly,  
Pain will happen.  
Then I said  
Will I ever find meaning?  
And they said  
You will find meaning  
Where you give meaning.

The answer is in the story  
And the story isn't finished.

John 1:1-14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was in God's presence, and the Word was God.

The Word was present to God from the beginning. Through the Word all things came into

being, and apart from the Word nothing that has come into being could have come into being.

In the Word was life, and that life was humanity's light—a Light that shines in the darkness, a

Light that the darkness can never fully overcome.

Then came one named John, sent as an envoy from God, who came as a witness to testify

about the Light, so that through his testimony others might come to know the Light of Life. He

himself wasn't the Light; he came to testify about the Light—the Light which illumines

Humankind.

The Word was coming into the world—was in the world—and though the world was made

through the Word, the world didn't recognize it. Though the Word came to its own realm, the

Word's own people didn't accept it. Yet any who did accept the Word, who knew and believed,

were empowered to become children of God. And the Word became flesh and came to dwell

among us. We saw the Word's glory, the care a parent gives their child, full of grace and truth.

**#134 CH Emmanuel, Emmanuel**

## **Children's Time**

### **#263 CH Surely the Presence of the Lord**

## **Community Prayers**

### **Prayer Song: #147 Away in a Manger**

## **Pastoral Prayer**

God of wisdom and truth,  
at the beginning of this new year  
we look back and we look forward.

In the year that has passed  
we experienced joy and we experienced sorrow;  
we felt blessed and we felt challenged.  
Some things went by much too fast,  
and some things lingered for far too long.

Here in this place  
we are reminded that you are present through it all.  
We are reminded that we are never alone.  
We are reminded that nothing can separate us from your love.

So at the beginning of this new year,  
we pause now in silence  
to reflect on the year that has passed.

We remember the things from this past year for which we are the most thankful.  
We recall the moments we experienced joy and deep belly laughter.  
We consider the times we felt most alive, courageous, and authentically  
ourselves.  
We recognize the times we gave and received the most love.

*(silence)*

We are grateful, God, that you were present in those times.

We pause, too, to also remember the things from this past year for which we are least thankful.

We recall the moments we looked for joy and couldn't find it.

We consider the times we felt weary, fearful, and desperate.

We recognize the times we gave and received the least love.

*(silence)*

We are grateful, God, that you were present in those times too.

And so, Holy One,

at the beginning of this new year,  
we look forward to the year to come.

We are confident that you will be with us still,  
when we are thankful and when we are not;  
when we are joyful and when we are sad;  
when we feel alive and when we feel drained;  
when we give and receive love and when we do not.

The world we live in is messy and challenging,  
it is the world of King Herod,  
a world of pain,  
a world of doubt,  
a world of fear,  
a world of jealousy,  
a world of violence,  
a world of domination,  
a world of injustice,  
a world of human failings.

Give us grace and courage  
to live faithfully in this imperfect world.

Remind us always of the promise of your kin-dom,  
emerging around us and through us.

It is for this kin-dom that we pray,

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kin-dom come, thy will

be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kin-dom, and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

### **Reflections for a New Year-Rev. Becker**

Based on my conversation with the children, you have probably guessed that there are few things as soothing or exciting to me as a brand-new planner. When I look at it, I see possibility and the chance for a fresh start...but here's the part that may not be good for my mental health...part of what I see is the opportunity to finally be perfect. Maybe this year I won't say something I wish I hadn't. This year, I will get everything on every to-do list done. This year, I will finally preach a sermon and think, "that was perfect, no room for improvement." Having high expectations isn't a bad thing, but expecting perfection isn't a good thing. In my head, I know perfection is not attainable, but that doesn't stop me from seeking it.

So, every year I plot and I plan, with the hope that I will finally find the magic formula for perfection. Maybe it's this new planner. Maybe it's this year's promise to rest more or to find joy in every moment. Maybe the formula is in one of the books I will read, or it will drop in my lap through a conversation with a colleague. Like some ambitious new year's resolutions, it doesn't take very long each year to realize this is not the year for perfection.

The truth friends is that every year will be a mixed bag of things to celebrate and things to tolerate. And sometimes we will celebrate well, sometimes we will barely stop to acknowledge that fabulous thing that happened. Sometimes we will use our best strategies to deal with the unpleasantness before us and sometimes we will nearly self-destruct. This mixed bag and the ways in which we deal with its messiness is called living. And maybe what we need to strive for, rather than perfection, is that we will do the best we can in the moment and we will try to remember that other people are doing the best they can too. It won't look or feel perfect, but it will be real. And I've never known anyone to get to the end of their life and wish they had been more phony or regret not hiding more of themselves from their family and friends. All each of us really desires is to be known and loved. Some of the responsibility for that rests with each of us though. To be fully known, we have to show up for life as our authentic

selves. We have to let people know who we really are. It is only then that people can truly know and love us.

We don't have to be...we can't be perfect, but we can be ourselves. As a church community, I believe we are called to be the kind of place where people can show up as themselves and be confident they will be met with love, recognizing love is messy too. Sometimes we disappoint each other, we blurt things out without stopping to take a breath, we screw up a beloved's pronouns, or it takes us too long to realize someone hasn't been in worship in a few weeks. But real love, like a new planner, creates opportunities to try again.

So, let's do that together, remembering that whether we are celebrating the day or just trying to get through it, we are never alone. We have been gifted with each other, always putting another leaf in the table, pulling up more chairs, and making room for the ones who are looking for a place to belong, a place where they can be themselves, be loved, and belong to a community that isn't held together by common belief, but by common purpose. I am so glad to get to try again with you to change the world, one act of love at a time.

My hope for you this year is:

A Blessing for the New Year by Joyce Rupp:

That the single, most significant dimension of life is your relationship with the Source of Goodness who never ceases to sing love songs to your soul.

That you find meaning, purpose, and vitality in what you do daily.

That you treasure your loved ones and let them know how dear they are to you.  
That you make choices and decisions that reflect your truest self.

That you look in the mirror at least once a day and smile in happy amazement.

That you remember relationships are what count above all else –  
more than work or money,  
or all the material things we spend so much time tending.

That you live in an uncluttered manner,  
enjoying the freedom to be content.  
That you keep your sense of humor  
when things don't go the way you want.

That you find adventure in each new day  
and marvel at the wonders of creation  
which constantly present themselves to you.

That you never give up on yourself  
when others turn away or do not understand.  
That you are attentive to the health  
of your body, mind, and spirit.

That you take risks and accept the growth-full challenges that come to you.  
That you draw on your inner strength and resiliency  
when you are in need.

That you carry peace within yourself,  
allowing it to slip into the hearts of others  
so our planet becomes a place  
where violence, division, and war are no more.  
[2023, here we come!]

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## **Communion**

**Communion Music #151 CH The First Noel**

**#167 CH Go Tell It on the Mountain**

## **Benediction**

