

youthESource Worship

It Is Not Far to Bethlehem: A Christmas Festival of Worship for the Congregation and Its Youth

by Rev. Dean Nadasdy

Introducing the Service

"It Is Not Far to Bethlehem" presents an opportunity for youth leadership in a traditional Christmas worship format. Options for youth participation in the service include the following:

Solo voice

Bells

Speech choir for "A Christmas Reading" (five or more people are needed; parts may be reassigned for more readers)

Lectors

Angel figure (dancer) and voice

Seven candle-bearers to light the Christmas candles

Because of the service's flexibility, as few as seven and as many as twenty-five or thirty could participate. One brief rehearsal will be sufficient to prepare for the service. Using youth in the musical portions of the service is encouraged.

Churches not permitted to have congregation-wide candlelight services may decide to have seven youth each light a candle, without passing the flame throughout the congregation.

Pre-Service Music

(The church is darkened, but reading should still be possible.)

The Prayers Ending Advent

Solo voice sings "Now Messiah Comes to Us" (*from a distance; perhaps from the church narthex; sung slowly, plaintively*) (music printed at the end of this resource):

Now Messiah comes to us so lowly lovingly,

The long awaited Savior comes to set His people free.

He knows the pain that all of us carry,

He bears it willingly.

Jesus comes from heaven above to lift us up with Him eternally.

Leader: The Spirit and the church cry out:

Congregation: Come, Lord Jesus.

(Three bell tones sound for the Trinity.)

L: All those who await His appearance pray:

C: Come, Lord Jesus.

(Four bell tones sound for the four corners of the earth, signaling all of Christendom's longing for the Lord.)

L: The whole creation pleads:

C: Come, Lord Jesus.

(Seven bell tones sound, striking the fulfillment of God's promises and an end to our waiting.)

Solo voice (*sung a second time; now from the rear of the worship area*):

Now Messiah comes to us, so lowly, lovingly;

The long-awaited Savior comes to set His people free.

He knows the pain that all of us carry.

He bears it willingly.

Jesus comes from heaven above to lift us up with Him eternally.

L: For forgiveness the Christ Child came, for the forgiveness of your sins and mine.

C: We pray for forgiveness, trusting in His love both now and forever:

(Sing stanza 4 of "O Little Town of Bethlehem" LSB 361.)

O holy Child of Bethlehem,
Descend to us, we pray;
Cast out our sin, And enter in,
Be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels
The great glad tidings tell;
Oh, come to us, Abide with us,
Our Lord Immanuel! Amen.

(Speech choir moves to the front of the worship area. The church remains darkened.)

A Christmas Reading: "It Is Not Far to Bethlehem"

For leader, speech choir and congregation

- L: It is not far to Bethlehem, where Christ the Lord was born;
C: Not far at all for now, as then, Christ comes into our night.
1: Then it was a couple, looking for a place to stay.
2: Now it is the insecure among us, unsure if we will ever find a home.
1: Then it was a couple in crisis, soon to have a child.
2: Now it is the family in crisis, uncertain of its future, threatened by change and conflict.
1: Then it was a lack of shelter for those who needed rest from travel.
2: Now it is the thousands of homeless who wonder if there will be "room in the inn" for them.
1: Lord Jesus, come gently into our dark night. Bring us security and contentedness, and, as we travel through life, a place to call home.
- L: It is not far to Bethlehem, where Christ the Lord was born;
C: Not far at all for then, as now, Christ comes into our night.
3: Then there were crowds of people, filling the streets and inns, rushing to meet responsibilities.
4: Today we are more frantic still, nonstop participants in a lifelong marathon race.
3: Then they missed Him, almost all of them. He came, and they didn't notice Him.
4: Today are we so busy that when He comes we fail to see Him. Each of us must answer for ourselves.
3: Then there were more important things than welcoming the world's Savior.
4: Today we must decide, "What has to take second place, or third, to the most important priority—Christ and His cause?"
3: Lord Jesus, come gently into our dark night. Alert us to Your coming so that, by Your Spirit, we may give You praise, glory, and thanks.
- L: It is not far to Bethlehem, where Christ the Lord was born;
C: Not far at all for now, as then, Christ comes into our night.
5: Near Bethlehem were sleepy shepherds, facing their routine chores.
1: Among us are those who know routine and the fatigue of the same old thing.
5: For the shepherds, a sky full of angels broke their routine, and they heard the Good News of grace, peace, and rescue.
1: For the sleepy-eyed slaves of scheduled chores the angels announce again the birth of the Son of God!
5: Lord Jesus, come gently into our dark night lest we miss Your kingdom's great surprise and endless joy.

Interlude-A soft and lilting carol, sung by the choir

- L: It is not far to Bethlehem, where Christ the Lord was born;
C: Not far at all for then, as now, Christ comes into our night.
2: In Bethlehem and long thereafter, Mary kept what she had seen and heard as treasures in her heart.
4: Here tonight, we ponder treasures of Christmases past, of loved ones now in heaven, of things that matter most—faith, family, friends.
2: Then the night was a time of stillness and contemplation.
4: It is the same this Christmas night.
2: Lord Jesus, come gently into our dark night, and we will, in Spirit-filled meditation, keep You as our priceless treasure.
- L: It is not far to Bethlehem, where Christ the Lord was born;
C: Not far at all for then, as now, Christ comes into our night.

3: Then they worshiped Him, those shepherds in from the fields.
1: Now we worship Him here.
3: Then they saw Him as more than just a baby.
2: Now we, too, glorify Him as the Son of God.
3: Then they left everything to pay their homage to Him.
5: Now we come, forsaking all;
4: That in these moments He and He alone might be our joy.
3: Lord Jesus, come gently into our dark night to chase away the shadows of despair that we may worship
You here this night in Spirit and in truth.
All: Amen.

(The lights remain dim. A dancer enters from the rear of the church. The dancer carries a taper and is dressed in white to represent the angelic host bearing the Gospel light at Christmas. The dancer may wear a garland on her or his head. With full voice, the soloist repeats the chorus, singing from a distance at first. The organ or another instrument plays on as the dancer lights the taper from a candle at the altar, and then lights the Christ candle on the Advent wreath. As the Christ candle is lit, the houselights are raised. Then the dancer speaks or sings:)

Angel *(may be sung to the tune of "From Heaven Above to Earth I Come," LSB 358):*
Look, look, dear friends, look over there!
What lie 'within that manger bare?
Who is that lovely little one?
The baby Jesus, God's dear Son.

(Bell begins to ring a free ring as the processional cross, banners, torches and worship leaders process. Bells continue free ring into opening stanza of "Joy to the World.")

Processional Carol- "Joy to the World" (LSB 387)

The Scripture Reading-Isaiah 9:2-7

Carol - Choral Anthem or "It Came upon the Midnight Clear" (LSB 366)

The Christmas Gospel

Solo voice *(sung from LSB 386):*
Now sing we, now rejoice
With heart and soul and voice.

C *(sung):* Life's most precious treasure
Here poor in manger lies;
He brings purer pleasure
Than sunlight from the skies.
Christ is born today!
Christ is born today!

The Reading of the Gospel Luke 2:1-20

(Following the reading of the Gospel, a small child brings forward the Christ figure for the church nativity scene, placing it in the scene. The organ or another instrument accompanies this action, which leads into the response.)

The Response

C *(sing to the refrain of "Angels We Have Heard on High," LSB 368):*
Gloria in excelsis Deo;
Gloria in excelsis Deo.

Carol

Sermon

Gathering of the Offerings

Voluntary

The Communion

Prayers

The Lord's Prayer

Words of Institution

The Peace

L: The peace of the Lord be with you always.

C: And also with you.

The Distribution

Carols and Hymns

Blessing of the Communicants

Prayer of Thanksgiving

The Lighting of the Christmas Candles *(The church is darkened.)*

L: By our lighting of candles on this holy night, let us remember that we leave this place to bear the light of Christ to the world. What began in Bethlehem was meant to bring light to all the earth. Let our candles symbolize our awareness of those in darkness around us and our commitment to carry the Gospel to them. It is not far to Bethlehem, and it is not far to those today who need the Savior's light.

(The seven candle-bearers come forward. Each speaks, while lighting a candle from the Christ candle, then carries the light to a section of the congregation. When all have spoken, they light the candles at the end of each row, and the light is passed. Please dip the unlit candle to receive a flame from a burning candle.)

- 1: We light a candle for those who do not know Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. We will tell them what we have seen and heard.
- 2: We light a candle for the orphaned and the homeless, refugees without shelter or family. We will work to bring them in to security and warmth.
- 3: We light a candle for the hungry, who wonder if they will eat tomorrow. We will feed them.
- 4: We light a candle for the lonely, those who this Christmas know the pain of loss and separation from loved ones. We will befriend them and speak of Immanuel, God with us, and with them, too.
- 5: We light a candle for those facing seemingly insurmountable odds, challenges summoning their greatest courage. We will pray for strength and support them along the way.
- 6: We light a candle for the poor, that they may know the fulfillment of work and the security of income. We will watch for them, help them, and bring them hope.
- 7: We light a candle for those whose nations are torn by war, that the peace of Christ may sustain them. We will speak for peace and pray for peace, knowing that the Gospel travels best in a world at peace.

(The congregation lights their candles from the seven already burning, passing a flame down the row. When all candles are burning, all sing the carol.)

Carol – "Silent Night, Holy Night" (LSB 363)

Blessing

1: Go out with the Good News borne by the angels.

2: Go out as shepherds, glorifying and praising God.

Solo (*sung*): Now sing we, now rejoice!

3: Go out as Mary, pondering these things in your heart.

Solo (*sung*): With heart and soul and voice.

L: Go out with peace, goodwill toward all, and the blessing of Immanuel, God with us, will be with you.

C: Amen.

Reprise of Carol (LSB 386)

C: Now sing we, now rejoice
With heart and soul and voice.
Life's most precious treasure
Here poor in manger lies;
He brings purer pleasure
Than sunlight from the skies.
Christ is born today!
Christ is born today!

(Candles are extinguished.)

Postlude

**Words and music to "Now Messiah Comes to Us" are on the final page.

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Now Messiah Comes to Us

Frusti/Burkart

The musical score is written on a single treble clef staff in 3/8 time. The key signature has two flats (Bb and Eb). The melody is simple and hymn-like, with lyrics written below the notes. Chord symbols are placed above the staff to indicate the harmonic accompaniment. The lyrics are: 'Now Mes - si - ah comes to us so low - ly lov - ing - ly. The long a - wait - ed Sav - ior comes to set His peo - ple free. He knows the pain that all of us car - ry, He bears it will - ing - ly. Je - sus comes from hea - ven a - bove to lift us up with Him e - ter - nal - ly.'

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Now Messiah Comes to Us

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