

THE LONGEST NIGHT SERVICE OR BLUE CHRISTMAS

By Jim Taylor

Instructions to the presider(s) and organizers.

Long before the service:

Please ensure that you have announced the special service in several regular Sunday worship services. Explain a bit about the pain that this season causes in some people, the way in which the constant refrain of family, of gathering, of celebration, of giving, and affluence, of happiness, can rub salt into the wounds that some people already bear. A significant benefit of such a service is the learning that comes to those who are not lonely, or poor, or in pain.

The actual longest night of this year is December 21, although of course, it isn't necessary to hold this service on that day.

Publicize the service in your regular Sunday bulletins and in your newsletter, if you have one. Phone or write colleagues in chaplaincy or counseling services, and send a notice to your local media outlets.

Consider sending personal invitations to persons you may know of for whom Christmas is a difficult season. Your congregation may be of help in identifying such persons. Suggest that they go to the service with the person they invite.

The invitation might use all or part of the following sample invitation:

An Invitation.

Christmas can be a painful time for some. It may be the first Christmas without a loved family member who has recently died; it may be a time that has always been difficult.

The constant refrain on the radio and television, in shopping malls and churches, about the happiness of the season, about getting together with family and friends, reminds many people of what they have lost or have never had. The anguish of broken relationships, the insecurity of unemployment, the weariness of ill health, the pain of isolation - all these can make us feel very alone in the midst of the celebrating and spending. We need the space and time to acknowledge our sadness and concern; we need to know that we are not alone.

Our spirits sink, as the days grow shorter. We feel the darkness growing deeper around us. We need encouragement to live the days ahead of us.

For these reasons, (Name of Church) offers a special "Longest Night" service on (Date) at (Time).

Come out, and join with us in sharing and hearing prayers, scripture, and

music that acknowledge that God's presence is for those who mourn, for those who struggle - and that God's Word comes to shine light into our darkness. Everyone, regardless of church background (or lack of it) is welcome.

The short service will be followed by a brief time for light refreshments and fellowship.

Because there is always the possibility, in these services of someone in the congregation being overcome by intense feelings, try to have at least two persons available who have some skills in counseling (not necessarily professionals) who can give distraught person(s) one-to-one ministry, if necessary.

Arrange for tea, coffee, juice, and other light refreshments as appropriate, following the service. This time of informal companionship is crucial. If possible, encourage those present at it act in one of these ways, as they choose:

1. For families who have homes and incomes, to invite someone else in for dinner, etc.
2. For those without invitations, to form a group among themselves, and arrange to go out for dinner or some other event.
3. In addition, the whole congregation might choose to extend invitations to a dinner in the church hall.

The Longest Night Service

The service has been designed to have three parts, with three different levels of participation.

Part 1 has the least congregational participation. It recognizes that many of those who attend such a service are ill at ease in conventional church services. They may have opted out of the church for years. They will be unfamiliar with the liturgy, and have been so hurt by their experiences that they would withdraw from any process that asks them to share their pain.

Therefore, the first part of the service allows them to be more or less passive, with the presider carrying most of the leadership. (One of the lonely people consulted about this service said, "There are times when I just want to sit in the back and absorb... I don't want a lot of up-down, up-down stuff!")

Of course, there will also be many who have a strong affiliation with the church, and who would be quite comfortable with the traditional liturgy. But we strongly suggest that the service not be focused towards them.

We suggest you take your time in leading the prayer of confession and intercession. Do not rush through it. Provide plenty of pauses, to allow people to identify themselves with the words of the prayer.

After a pause for individual reflection, conclude with an assurance of acceptance

appropriate to your local congregation's customs. But please try to avoid implying in any way that their present pain or misery is a consequence of their sin. This perpetuates the concept of victim as sinner - a notion they don't need. (That's why we refer to an "assurance of acceptance.")

Part 2 shifts the mood towards more active involvement by the congregation. As leader, you may want to preface this portion of the service by explaining that the Scriptures present a picture. Although all we have time to read in any service is fragments of the Bible, those fragments should, like small pieces in a larger jigsaw puzzle, reveal a coherent larger picture.

In this service, we recommend not having a conventional sermon. Instead, we suggest a series of readings from the Bible, from both the Hebrew and the Christian scriptures, followed by:

- a) A very brief commentary, identifying a significant theme in that reading.
- b) The lighting of a candle by a volunteer from the congregation.
- c) A brief prayer.

We suggest lighting candles because their light becomes a sign of hope in this season of darkness. (If feasible, dim the lights in the church to accentuate the light from the candles.)

Following the reading, invite someone from the congregation to come forward to light a candle from the central Christ candle. This person does not need to say anything or to reveal anything about his/her past - merely to light a candle. For the lighting, we suggest tapers.

Do not rush these volunteer candle lighters. Some may only volunteer in considerable fear and trembling. Wait in silence for someone to respond. If eventually, no one comes forward, light the candle yourself. Or you may have asked some of your regular members to respond if no one else does.

We do not recommend using all of the readings offered. Four or five is probably plenty. Choose the readings that best relate to the concerns expressed by the congregation for this service. Be prepared if necessary to supplement with other passages that may be more appropriate to the gathering.

Be sure to have the Christ candle lit, ready for use, and to have enough additional candles on hand for lighting to accompany the readings you choose.

This portion of the service could be led by a single presider. It could also be very effective with two presiders, taking turns.

Part 3 tries to move as seamlessly as possible from hearing of the word into enacting the word. The suggested order keeps words of any kind to a minimum. For that reason, it doesn't include any specific reading of scripture, nor a traditional "Great Thanksgiving" prayer. Keeping that principle in mind, feel free to substitute wordings more familiar to your own denominational tradition for those shown. The

words shown are adapted from the Reformed/Methodist traditions. Whatever your denominational tradition, though, you need to decide how the elements shall be served to the people. (The decision may be affected by the number who attend the service, and may therefore need to be amended at the last minute!) Take into account local traditions. But also consider what the actions of distributing the elements communicate by themselves.

- a) Elements served at the chancel or altar rail involve a one-to-one relationship between the dispenser and the recipient. But they also imply a power hierarchy: the presiders seem to “own” the elements, dispensing them like charity to a lesser group who may only touch them.
- b) Elements served in the pews (or gathered around the table) imply a greater equality among participants - especially if the presiders come down from the chancel and sit in the pews to receive the elements with everyone else. Distributing the elements in the pews also requires people to minister to each other.
- c) If people consume the elements as they are received, communion takes on a personal and private (even exclusive) relationship with God.
- d) On the other hand, having people wait to partake together may imply a false cohesiveness and unity.

We suggested distributing the elements in the pews, with the people partaking of the elements at their own time. This recognizes that the people attending this particular service do not feel a unity; they are there because they feel isolated and alone. We also suggest that the presiders give the bread and wine to the servers at the table, then come down to sit with the congregation to receive the elements. If all participants are encouraged to say words such as “The bread of life” and “The true vine” while passing the bread and wine/juice to each other, then the servers may partake when they receive the elements from the person on the end of a pew, before passing the bread/wine on to the next pew.

Whatever you choose, explain the procedures clearly to the worshippers present before you begin the communion, remembering that many of them may not be familiar with your communion customs. We strongly recommend that the passing of the bread and wine should take place in silence, aside from the words of consecration spoken quietly by each participant passing the elements on. Do not cover up the emotions of this time with soothing music.

Because many may have outdated or mistaken ideas of who is permitted to partake of a communion service or agape meal, we urge you to invite everyone - as far as is possible within your denomination’s policies. The people attending may have had enough experience of feeling excluded already, without the church adding further exclusion. (If you cannot find some way of including them, perhaps you should not have this service.)

At the conclusion of this portion of the service, before the benediction, the presider should invite members to the informal period of refreshments. If the congregation is going to sponsor a Christmas dinner, or if you want to encourage the worship participants to invite guests or arrange for gatherings, this is the time to announce it.

The Longest Night Service

Part 1

Preparation

Call to worship:

Leader: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was

God.

People: The Word became flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth, and we

have seen his glory.

Leader: In him was life, and that life was the light of all.

People: The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has never been able to extinguish it.

Words of explanation:

Welcome to this “**Longest Night**” service. “The name comes from the season - during this season in December, we experience the shortest day and the longest night of the year. But the name also applies to the feeling that a number of us have about this season. It is the “long dark night of the soul,” “the winter of our discontent,” in which memories of past experiences and the pain of present experiences can become overwhelming.

For some, Christmas Day is the most difficult. For others, Christmas Eve, or New Year’s Eve, or the beginning of another lonely New Year.

In this service, we will have some singing appropriate to the season, recognizing that this is not necessarily a season of joy. We will invite you to meditate on the pain and anguish you may bring, and to offer your pain to the Christ child. And we trust that you will find hope and comfort in knowing that you are not alone.

Let us begin our worship by singing familiar Christmas songs and carols. Please listen to the poignancy of the words, as you sing the verses.

Carol(s): *O Little Town of Bethlehem* (tune: St.. Louis; verses 1-3)
O Come, O Come Emmanuel
Away in a Manger
Moon of Wintertime (Huron Carol)

Prayer of Confession and Intercession

God, we come to you on this Christmas season, with the pain growing inside us. As the nights have been growing longer, so has the darkness wrapped itself around our hearts.

In this season of our longest nights, we offer to you the pain in our hearts, the traumas that some of us cannot put into words.

God, we come to you as those who have been abused. We have been hurt, physically, emotionally, sexually. As children, as teenagers, as adults, we have had the trust we gave others violated. We have no confidence in ourselves; we cringe away from any threat. God, we are the outsiders. We are the ones who seem to stand on the edges of any group. We find ourselves always looking in over someone else's shoulders, and when we try to move to the center, we feel as if we are getting elbowed out of the way.

God, we are the minorities. We come from all over the world. We are newcomers and immigrants, strangers in a foreign land. And we are the original peoples, who extended hospitality to the newcomers, and found ourselves caged in reservations. We struggle to discover our dignity among alien customs, among values that are not our own.

God, we are grieving over what might have been. A death or a loss has changed this day. Once it was a special day for us too. But someone has died. Someone has let us. Someone has moved away. We have lost a job. We have lost a dream, a goal, a cause. WE find ourselves adrift, alone, lost in a terrifying new world. This season reminds us of all that used to be, and cannot be any more.

God, we are the victims. From this temporary period of peace, we will go back to situations where we are beaten, exploited, humiliated. We would escape if we could - but to what? We are as afraid of the future as of the present.

The memories of what was, the fears of what may be, stifle us. All around us we hear the sounds of celebration, the jingle of cash registers, the rustle of wrapping paper. But some of us have nothing we can give, and some of us have no one to give anything to. This is our longest night, Lord. Please be near us tonight. We ask it in Jesus' name.

Pause for individual reflection:

Assurance of acceptance by God:

Carol: *In the Bleak Midwinter* (verses 1-2 only)

Part 2

Hearing the Word of God for our time, our place.

Suggested readings: *choose four or five.*

Reading: Matthew 22:1-10 or Luke 14:15-24 (the Wedding Feast, in which all the outsiders were gathered in)

Comment: This story offers hope for those who have no one to invite them in. It reminds us that in God's divine order, no one is excluded; all are invited.

Invitation: Would one of you, perhaps someone who finds this reading relevant to your own situation, come forward to light a candle?

Prayer after lighting candle: Lord our God, may your fellowship be available to all, including those who feel excluded. Amen.

Reading: Luke 2:1-7 (Bethlehem, where there was no room for them in the inn)

Comment: Jesus himself was no stranger to being a stranger, an outsider, a refugee.

Invitation to light candle:

Prayer after lighting candle: Lord Jesus, let those who are far from home, those who are strangers, feel that they genuinely belong in your company. Amen.

Reading: 1 Kings 19:1-3a, 8-15a (Elijah flees for his life, alone, to the mountain.)

Comment: Sometimes it is only in isolation that we can hear the still small voice through which God speaks to us.

Invitation to light candle:

Prayer after lighting candle: Spirit of God, calm the turmoil in our souls so that we can hear your still small voice. Amen.

Reading: Luke 6:17-23 (The Beatitudes, Blessed are those who weep, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst, etc.)

Comment: This familiar passage reveals that Jesus was well aware of people's sorrows, yearnings, and suffering--and offered a promise of something different.

Invitation to light candle:

Prayer after lighting candle: Lord Jesus, like this candle, bring some warmth and light to those who mourn, who hunger and thirst, and who weep.

Reading: Matthew 8:14-22 or Luke 9:57-62 (Foxes have holes, and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere...)

Comment: In his own life, Jesus shared the experience of having no place to call home, no family, no security.

Invitation to light candle:

Prayer after lighting candle: Lord Jesus, you know what it's like to be rootless. Give each of us a way of putting down roots where we can grow. Amen.

Reading: Matthew 2:9-18 (The massacre of the infants)

Comment: Anniversaries and special events are not always happy times. For the people in Bethlehem, the birth of Jesus would always remind them of the army that massacred their children.

Invitation to light candle:

Prayer after lighting candle: Dear God, you suffered when your child died. In your compassion, ease our suffering. Amen.

Reading: Psalm 22:1-11 (My God, my God...)

Comment: Even Jesus knew the feeling of being abandoned by God, the God whom he had believed in, and of being left alone in his darkness.

Invitation to light candle:

Prayer after lighting candle: Spirit of God, shine like this candle in the darkness, lighting the way for all who feel abandoned, forsaken, and forgotten. Amen.

Reading: Matthew 11:28-29 (Weary and burdened receive rest)

Comment: When burdens get piled on top of other burdens, the load can crush us. In his promise, Jesus offers us help to carry our burdens and responsibilities.

Invitation to light candle:

Prayer after lighting candle: Friend Jesus, we don't ask you to shoulder our burdens for us--just help us carry a corner of them, and we can carry on. Amen.

Reading: Revelation 7:15-17 or 21:1-7 (A new heaven, a new earth)

Comment: Our present world is not how God wants things to be. Those who weep now will not weep later. In this new heaven and new earth, there will be no more need for tears.)

Invitation to light candle:

Prayer after lighting candle: Lord God, your vision seems a long way in the future. Bring your promise closer to us, we pray. Amen.

Part 3

The Body of Christ.

Offering

Processing with the offering, following immediately by the communion elements.

Offertory carol: *In the Bleak Midwinter* (verses 3-4)

Invitation to participate:

Leader: I invite all who profess Jesus as Lord and Savior and who seek to follow in his way and to live in unity with one another, to come to this table with reverence and with faith. Eat and drink for your strengthening, that you may grow in grace and be blessed, remembering that we, though many, are one body in Jesus Christ.

Leader: Peace be with you.

People: **And also with you.**

Leader: Lift up your hearts.

People: **We lift them up to the Lord.**

Consecration:

Leader: Lord God, we set before you this holy supper, following the command of Jesus, who, the night in which he was betrayed, took bread and blessed it, and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying: "Take, eat, this is my body, broken for you." And on the same night, in the same way, he took a cup, and raised it, and poured it out for his disciples to drink, saying, "Drink of this cup, all of you. This is the new covenant, in my blood poured out for you."

Leader and people: In union with each other and with our Lord Jesus Christ , who gave himself for us and for the world, and in communion with the whole church, we offer ourselves to you.

Leader: And now, as Jesus taught us, we say:

All: Our father, who art in heaven hallowed be thy name
Thy kingdom come
Thy will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread
and forgive our trespasses
as we forgive those who trespass against us
and lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.
for thine is the kingdom, and power, and the glory
for ever and ever. Amen.

The minister takes the bread and breaks it, saying

The body of Christ, broken for you.

The minister raises the cup, saying

The blood of Christ, shed for you.

Distribution of the elements**Prayer after communion:**

All: For the bread we have eaten
for the wine we have tasted
for the life we have received
we thank you, God.

Grant that what we have done
and have been given here
may put its mark upon us
and remain in our hearts,
so that we may mature as followers of Christ,
and may reveal our faith in our actions,
through Christ our Lord and our companion in life.
Amen.

Carol:

Go Tell it on the Mountain (a spiritual, sung by people who knew oppression and suffering)

Stay with us through the Night (from All God's Children Sing)

Come Though Long-expected Jesus

Announcement: about post-worship gathering, if applicable.

Blessing:

Leader: The life our Lord Jesus Christ, who lived and suffered and died for the sake of all suffering and hurting humans, yesterday, today, and tomorrow; the peace of God, which passes all understanding; and the presence of God's Holy Spirit supporting and encouraging you, be with you through this season of the longest night.

Carol: *Silent Night* (while remaining seated)