



CLOSE to
HOME

A LITURGY FOR THE LONGEST NIGHT

Liturgy by Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed

We invite you to implement this liturgy as-is, or adapt it for your context.

Please attribute credit as follows: Liturgy by Rev. Sarah Speed | A Sanctified Art LLC | sanctifiedart.org.

Refer to our licensing guidelines for more information: sanctifiedart.org/licensing-terms.

ABOUT THIS LITURGY OUTLINE

- For corporate worship, text within quotation marks is to be spoken by worship leaders.
- *Italicized notes are for individuals using this liturgy for prayer and reflection at home.*
- **Bolded lines are to be spoken by the congregation and printed in bulletins or projected on screens.**

ABOUT THIS SERVICE

For those who have experienced loss, the holidays can be a particularly painful time, stirring up grief in acute ways. As a result, churches around the world have adopted the practice of having a “Blue Christmas” or a “Longest Night” service during the Advent season. In the Northern hemisphere, this service is often observed on December 21st, the Winter Solstice, which is the longest night of the year. However, this service can be held at any time throughout the Advent or Christmas season.

A Longest Night service is designed to provide space for prayer, reflection, and remembrance amidst the holiday hustle and bustle. In this pandemic season of life, we imagine that grief and loss will be magnified and nearly universal, and a service like this may be needed now more than ever. Therefore, we hope that these words and this order of worship can be a gift to individuals and communities alike, providing a space of calm, quiet, and healing.

Please note: This service is designed for congregational worship (in-person and/or virtually), but it can also be used by individuals in the comfort of their own home. For individual use, see notes for adaptation included in the service.

SETTING + SUPPLIES

- If possible, arrange your space so that you are worshipping in the round, with participants facing each other. This is ideal for the communal sending in which the congregation will speak aloud a litany while looking out at each person present. However, the service can also be held in a space with rows of pews.
- Before the service, set a large table with unlit candles in different heights and sizes. There should be 1-3 candles for each anticipated guest. You might include one large candle in the middle that is lit at the beginning and stays lit throughout the service. Include candle lighting tapers on the edge of the table. At the end of the service, worshippers will come forward and use the tapers to light the candles on the table. If you have a large space, you might include multiple candle lighting tables around the room that are easily accessible. *(If worshipping from home, gather candles from around your home and place them where you are worshipping.)*
- Include the Advent wreath in your worship space, and ensure that it is lit before the service begins.
- Dim the lights in your space. In addition to the unlit candles on the candle lighting tables, have additional candles in the space that are already lit and stay lit throughout the service to set the tone and help mark this service as a unique experience.
- As people enter the space, give each individual a piece of paper (or a large index card) and a pen for written prayers. Have baskets at the exit for people to return their pens as they leave. *(If worshipping from home, have a piece of paper and pen ready).*

GATHERING

Gathering Music

For gathering music, either play recorded music from the *A Sanctified Art Close to Home* playlist on Spotify,¹ or invite musicians in your congregation to provide live instrumental music as people gather. The goal is to provide a quiet, calm, reflective space as people enter.

Opening Poem

If worshipping as a community, invite a member of your community to read this poem as an opening prayer, saying the following:

¹ Find & listen to the *Close to Home* Advent playlist here: [spotify.com/playlist/3Y40ddQ745btYzMIPUnpUL?si=cb7598ad2fa04a00](https://open.spotify.com/playlist/3Y40ddQ745btYzMIPUnpUL?si=cb7598ad2fa04a00).

[open.](#)

GATHERING *cont.*

Opening Poem *cont.*

“As we gather our hearts in this space, I invite you to close your eyes and take a deep breath. Inhale what is good. Exhale what is hurting. As we settle into this service of prayer and reflection together, we begin with a poem written by Rev. Sarah Are Speed. Listen now to this honest reflection, and allow this honesty to mark this space as one set apart.”

We are raw nerves, exposed and tender.
We are weary bones, hunched and fragile.
We are silent prayers, lips saying your name.
We are wedding rings we can't take off, even though time has passed.
We are the same pew, but it feels different now.
We are a brave face when we have to be strong.
We are tears in the shower when grief roars its head.
We are setting the table, but there are empty seats.
We are stuck in the swell, caught in the storm.
We are moving on, caught in our guilt.
We are okay some days, but some days we're not.
We are familiar with the night, we know it by name.
We are night-walkers, dream-makers, star-chasers.
We are close to home, but home has changed.
We are close to the surface, but the waters are rising.
We are all of this, plus everything else, and we are here.
We are here.
Grief is here.
God is here.
The night is here.
And all of this is true,
and we are not alone.
Take my hand.
Take these words.
Let them be your life raft.
Let this be the longest night,
and let it be
whatever you need it to be.
We are here.
Grief is here.
God is here.
Take what you need.
Amen.

Adaptation for individual use: If participating in this service at home, read the following poem a few times through, out loud. Circle or underline the phrases and words that resonate with you.

GATHERING *cont.*

Opening Hymn | “In the Bleak Midwinter” (Words: Christina Georgina Rossetti, Tune: CRANHAM, c. 1872, Public Domain)

Adaptation for individual use: Cue up your favorite Christmas song. As you listen, gather a few candles from around your house. Light one. Save the rest for the candle lighting at the end. Focus on the glow of the candle light and allow the music and the light to mark a space set apart.

READING THE WORD

Prayer for Illumination

God, we do not have night vision.
The sun has set on the world as we know it
and we do not have night vision.
So today we come to your Word
hoping that this ancient truth found in scripture
will feel like a hand in the dark.

Guide our feet.
Move us through this wilderness season.
Tilt our heads upward to see the stars,
and let your Word be a blanket in the cold,
a light on the horizon,
and a friend to walk alongside.

We do not have night vision,
but we know we have you.
Move through us.
Move among us
and move through us.
Gratefully we pray,
amen.

Scripture Reading

Select and read aloud a few readings from the following list that feel fitting for your community on this day. Invite different liturgists to read each scripture.

- **Isaiah 40**

Written during the exile, when many of the Israelites were captives in a foreign land, this is a text of lament, asking for God’s comfort.

- **Lamentations 3:21-24**

This passage is a prayer of honesty, both acknowledging individual pain while also declaring the choice to hope through tear-filled eyes.

READING THE WORD *cont.*

Scripture Reading *cont.*

- **John 14:27-28**

This passage is a moving reminder from Jesus that there are different seasons of life and faith, but that God is always returning to us.

- **Psalm 121**

This is a psalm of comfort and hope, reminding us that our help comes from God, and that we never journey alone.

Adaptation for individual use: If worshiping at home, pick one or two readings that you are drawn to. Read them each a few times through. Circle or underline the words and phrases that stand out to you. Try reading the words both silently and out loud to help you hear different things in each pass through.

RESPONDING

Prayer of the People *(with “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel”² Refrain)*

Use or adapt the following prayer. Consider using a different voice for each stanza. In between stanzas, sing the refrain of “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” to incorporate another sensory experience in the prayer.

God who always welcomes us home—
tonight is a long night.

We gather together heavy with prayer concerns.

They tumble out of our mouths,
they saturate every word we sing,
they lay over us like a quilt, weighing on our spirits.

We are a million combinations of weary and sad, lonely and grieving, angry and hurt.
It is obvious that we need you, so together we sing...

Refrain: “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel”

God, we need you in the messy middles,
in the unclear paths forward, the transition seasons, and the splinterings of what once was.

God, we need you in the grieving places,
in the dining rooms with empty chairs, in the empty wombs, and in the dark of the tomb.

God, we need you in our failed dreams,
in shame that rises quickly, in the unknown next steps, in the discernment that is always
easier said than done.

And so we sing...

² Words: John Mason Neale, Tune: VENI EMMANUEL, 1851, Public Domain.

RESPONDING *cont.*

Prayer of the People *cont.*

Refrain: “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel”

[Add in current prayers for cultural events and needs at the time. These can be prayers for our nation, the world, or your individual city].

O come, Emmanuel.

Flood our grieving hearts.

Pour out your Spirit on this world.

Where there is suffering, loneliness, poverty, abuse, addiction, depression—be there.

Be all there.

Wrap your arms around those hurting places, and carry us to your promised day.

Until then, we will continue to sing...

Refrain: “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel”

Now using the words your son taught us to pray, we say together,

Our Father...

(Continue the Lord’s Prayer in the language most familiar to you.)

Adaptation for individual use: Read aloud the prayer, offering your own personal prayers for others in the space provided. If you are familiar with “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,” feel free to sing the refrain a cappella. If you are not interested in singing, cue up some music to go between each stanza, or simply read the prayer right through—paying special attention to what lines pull on your heart.

Individual Prayer

Having prayed together as a community, we now shift our attention to the individual prayers that weigh on our hearts. Bring people’s attention to the piece of paper and pen they received when entering the space. Invite them to join you in a guided written prayer practice. Provide the following prompts, with space in between, inviting people to write their prayers in response. As you do, play [The Hurting Times by Barnaby Bright](#)³ in the background. Alternatively, you could offer the prayer prompts in silence, then play “The Hurting Times” music video afterward for a time of reflection.

The story behind the song: “The Hurting Times” was written by the band Barnaby Bright (who wrote our Close to Home theme song), after hearing a story in worship at Village Presbyterian Church, in Prairie Village, KS. In his sermon that Sunday, Rev. Tom Are told a story of the way his grandmother used to say, “I wish I could give you my heart for the hurting times.” Inspired by these words, they wrote a song which became “The Hurting Times.” It is a powerful story of a love that would do anything for another. In many ways, it can remind us of how God grieves alongside us and feels all that we feel.

³ “The Hurting Times.” Written by Becky Bliss, performed by Barnaby Bright, produced by Nathan Bliss, Gus Berry, & Hugo Dunn-Vereker. 2020. [youtube.com/watch?v=Eb7aUpuz88U](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eb7aUpuz88U).

RESPONDING *cont.*

Individual Prayer *cont.*

Prayer Prompts

- Write five words that describe how you're feeling in this moment.
- Write down the names of people you carry in your heart today.
- Write down one area of your own life where you could use God's help, comfort, or guidance.
- Write down a prayer for your faith journey.
- Write down a prayer concern you have for our world.
- Take a minute to write any lingering prayers you have at this moment.

Adaptation for individual use: If you have a journal that you use with regularity, you are encouraged to use that journal to write these prayers. Writing prayers during a challenging season that you might later revisit has the power to help you look back on your life and see how God has been present with you over the days and months and years.

Candle Lighting

Having prayed together as a community individually and communally, take a few moments to ritualize the weight and significance of these prayers. Invite each individual to think of a person, incident, experience, or need in their life that they wish to lift up to God. Invite people to move forward by rows to light a candle or two in honor of that prayer. Watch the room grow brighter as the light spreads.

As you light the candles, play the *Close to Home* theme song by *Barnaby Bright*.⁴ If you have screen access, you can show the music video.

Adaptation for individual use: With the collection of candles you gathered, have your own candle lighting moment at this time. If you do not have candles handy, feel free to write down your prayer for this moment and to circle it on your page, allowing it to stand out in some way.

SENDING

Communal Sending | "We See One Another"

As people return to their seats, offer the following prompt:

"As you return to your seat, take a few moments to look around the room at each person present. Look into your neighbor's eyes, acknowledging that we can never fully know what it is that each of us carry. Scan the room and find another person to look eyes with, gazing upon them with care and empathy. For a moment, hold them in your heart. Now continue to scan the faces in this room as we speak together this litany. Repeat after me..."

⁴ The *Close to Home* theme song music video is included in our *Close to Home* Advent bundle, which can be accessed on this page: sanctifiedart.org/close-to-home-advent-bundle-year-c.

senbina *cont.*

Communal Sending *cont.*

One: We are here.

All: We are here.

One: I see you and your pain.

All: I see you and your pain.

One: I see you and your hope.

All: I see you and your hope.

One: You are my neighbor.

All: You are my neighbor.

One: We belong to one another.

All: We belong to one another.

One: We are not in this alone.

All: We are not in this alone.

One: Thanks be to God for the love that binds us.

All: Thanks be to God for the love that binds us.

One: Amen.

Adaptation for individual use: Pull out your cell phone. Scroll through the last 10-20 people you have called or texted. Take a few moments to pause over each name, remembering each individual and what they might be carrying on this day. Say a brief prayer for them and remember that you are not alone.

Benediction

Feel free to use the following benediction, or one of your own.

As you leave *this* service, *your* service begins:

Comfort the homesick.

Open your doors to others.

Seek sanctuary.

Be brave enough to go home by another way.

And remember that here in God's house, all are welcomed—
so come back soon.

In the name of our Foundation—

God, Spirit, and Son—

go in peace.

Dawn is coming.

Amen.

Adaptation for individual use: Speak aloud the words of this benediction to yourself. Blow out your candles. Take a deep breath. Allow this moment to come to an end. Thank yourself for giving your heart this intentional time.

Postlude

Similar to the gathering music, either play recorded music from the *A Sanctified Art Close to Home* playlist on Spotify,⁵ or invite musicians in your congregation to provide live instrumental music as people exit. The goal is to provide a quiet, calm, reflective space as people depart.

⁵ Find & listen to the *Close to Home* Advent playlist here:
open.spotify.com/playlist/3Y40ddQ745btYzMIPUnpUL?si=cb7598ad2fa04a00.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed, *Founding Creative Partner of A Sanctified Art*

Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed (*she/her*) is the new Associate Pastor for Young Adults and Membership at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City. She graduated from Virginia Commonwealth University with a degree in Social Work, and holds a Master of Divinity degree from Columbia Theological Seminary. Sarah loves to combine her love of all things creative with her passion for God. She believes that the Church has a responsibility to open every door to God, so that those of us who are visual, kinesthetic, or relational learners all have equal opportunity to engage God to the fullest of our abilities. Sarah feels called to live her life welcoming people into the church by using her energy and passion for beautifully scripted words, raw and relevant liturgy, and hands-on worship experiences to engage our longing for God and the need for justice in this messy world. Writing is her most beloved spiritual practice. You can find her daily poems on Instagram and Facebook: @writingthegood | writingthegood.com

A Sanctified Art LLC is a collective of artists in ministry who create resources for worshipping communities. The Sanctified Art team works collaboratively to bring scripture and theological themes to life through film, visual art, curriculum, coloring pages, liturgy, graphic designs, and more. Their mission is to empower churches with resources to inspire creativity in worship and beyond. Driven by the connective and prophetic power of art, they believe that art helps us connect our hearts with our hands, our faith with our lives, and our mess with our God. Learn more about their work at sanctifiedart.org.

