

Throughout Advent, we proclaim hope, peace, joy, and love in the midst of difficulty. This is the church's gift to the world–that our faith story is grounded in the presence of God that came and dwelt among us in the midst of hardship. But on the "longest night"–the Winter Solstice–it has become a tradition among some churches to hold a "Blue Christmas" or "Longest Night" service to acknowledge and remember those we have lost. It is important to name that sometimes hope, peace, joy, and love are distant feelings when we have encountered great loss. The anticipation of renewed grief as Christmas Eve approaches can be difficult to bear for many. Ritual helps us move through these feelings and funnel our heartbreak in ways that, while not alleviating it totally, gives space for a tangible remembering.



Consider setting up a tree inside or outside your church with all blue lights (doing this outside can offer an easy and casual way to issue an invitation to non-church-goers… perhaps get permission to do this in a city park). On the longest night, you could invite people to come and gather around the tree for a brief ritual of lighting candles and laying luminaries, perhaps with blue lights in them, at the foot of the tree with the names of people in your community who have died this year, but also words and phrases of other laments: loss of jobs, livelihoods, civility, well-being, or any other difficulties that participants may wish to name. Alternatively (or additionally), you could create star ornaments for people to write these things on for hanging on the tree. Set up a table/station for people to write on the luminaries or ornaments before placing them during the ritual. (See examples of simple luminaries and stars to create on the next page.)

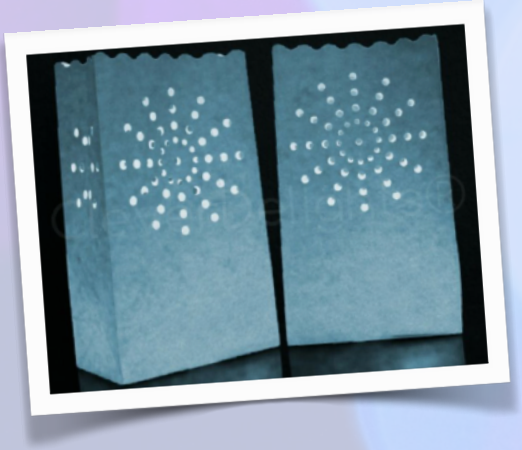
You might also consider gathering items under the tree to share with your local food bank, homeless shelters, hospitals, immigration service centers, rehabilitation clinics, etc. Contact these centers to find out what items would be appreciated by staff or visitors. Do whatever feels right for your community–even inviting the wider community beyond your church members to contribute. The point is that when we extend ourselves in action toward alleviating suffering, we help to alleviate our own suffering souls.



Order blue tea light candles HERE



Blue disposable cups can become luminaries by removing the bottom of the cup and punching holes in the side to let the light shine through (or just use the cup right-side-up and place a battery tea light in the bottom of the cup).



Blue paper bags (with or without a hole-punch design) could be used with a battery-operated candle inside.



Star ornaments are easy to find (or make your own). You could use watercolors to paint them blue if you want and give people Sharpies (they come in silver and gold too) to write on them. If you are going this route, at the end of the ritual, you could invite people to leave them or take them home.



You could use Facebook Live (or another streaming platform) to stream the gathering to those who cannot be present, and/or you could supplement this on-site gathering with an online ritual. The Litany of Losses in this ritual uses 5 candles. Many churches use four blue candles and one white candle. Various liturgies highlight different "topics" for each candle, for instance: those we have lost, the pain of loss, our burdens, our faith; or grief, courage, memories, love. Then the white candle represents the presence of Christ in the midst of all of this. The picture to the right is from WDS subscriber, Leslie Stanford in Northern Illinois. She said her church had never done a "blue Christmas" ritual before and "it went over better than expected" (this is usually true when such special care is used to prepare something new for the congregation).

The ritual on the following pages is meant to be a brief one so that if you are doing it outside, people are not standing for a long time (especially if it is cold!). You can supplement more readings or liturgy if you are doing a full hour service inside and connect the theme of the worship series you are doing for Advent/Christmas. Check out this beautiful service offered up by another WDS Subscriber, Jeff Spencer, with several scriptural readings.

All responses in the ritual below are "repeat-after-me" responses to facilitate easy participation without the need for distributing paper or projecting words (although you certainly could if you had the technology — see THIS story of projections on the outside of churches). As always, please adapt to fit your context more closely and use one or multiple readers as you so choose.

Gathering

Music is playing as people gather, either by live musicians or recorded and played with a portable speaker. It is especially important when inviting a more general crowd than simply your congregation to give people the "cover of music" to approach and find a spot to be. It can also set a tone or mood of contemplation and, if occurring in a public place, can signal that something is happening. If you are doing this in a public space, consider creating a sign that lets passers-by know they are invited and what to do if you are inviting people to a ritual action.



Greeting

Welcome, friends. Tonight is the longest night of the year. Rituals have been observed on this date since ancient times. The long night has become symbolic of those times when we feel as if illumination is scarce. We might be feeling low because of a loss–of loved ones, the loss of relationships or jobs or the loss of a sense of security and safety. All of us experience loss. It is in the Holy Darkness that we can see light. Ancient people held vigil on the longest night so that they could witness the dawning of a new day–knowing that each day's sunlight would remain with them longer and longer in the coming months. This has always been a sign of hope for humanity, no matter the religion or creed.

And so we spend a moment this longest night to acknowledge loss and also remember that there is hope. Just simply gathering together is the start of hope for a new day.

The holiday season can be hard for some of us as we struggle to be "merry" when we don't actually feel merry and bright. We are not alone. Sorrow is a part of being human, and the Christmas story actually has its fair share of hardship. We can feel warm and fuzzy about a baby being born, but we also must remember that this baby was born into a world, a region, and a time when his Jewish parents were under occupation and treated as lower on the social ladder than the ruling class. We can bask in the giving of gifts spurred by the story of the wise ones giving the baby Jesus gifts, but we also remember that those wise ones had been in conversation with a terrible tyrant ruler, Herod, who would later order all the young ones killed because of his fear that Jesus, the "King of the Jews," would grow to lead a revolution against him. Fear and suffering and heartbreak are part of the story.

So no matter what you carry in this moment–fear, sorrow, loss, suffering, heartbreak–it is part of the human story *and* the divine story. We are never alone. The Holy Comforter is with us. Let this be our prayer:

Holy and Comforting One,
we come before you feeling vulnerable and spent.
Our souls weep, and we wonder how we will get through a time
when bells ring and gifts are exchanged and the word "merry" surrounds us.
We long for the "time before"–
before this sorrow came to dwell.
Help us to trust in your love.
In this season of anticipation,
help us to expect that as certain as the waves of grief
are the moments when you will offer us a little peace,
and that it is right and good to feel all of it.
Be with us. Come to us. Live in us, Emmanuel, God with Us. Amen.

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Hymn of Longing
"O Little Town of Bethlehem" vs .1

O little town of Bethlehem,
how still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
the silent stars go by.
Yet in thy dark streets shineth
the everlasting light;
the hopes and fears of all the years
are met in thee tonight.

A Litany for Losses

Psalm 36:9 says, "Within You is the spring of life; in your light, we see light."

As we light up this tree,
though its light is as blue as many of us feel,
the light is still there.
When we feel as if our light is dimmed,
we can rely on the Holy Light to continue to shine
until we ourselves shine bright once more.

We are not alone.

[if you are including a moment of lighting the tree, do it at this moment]

Please join me in a Litany of Losses. Your lines will be prompted.

Loss of Life

We mourn this night the loss of life.
[light the first candle]

Some of us have lost loved ones, friends, or coworkers.
And we know that there has been loss of life all over this globe.

I invite you to repeat after me:

We mourn the loss of life.
We mourn the loss of life.
We honor and remember these beloveds.
We honor and remember these beloveds.
We pray for comfort and peace.
We pray for comfort and peace.
Amen. **Amen.**

Loss of Livelihood

We mourn this night the loss of livelihoods.
[light the second candle]

Some of us have lost jobs, or
dreams and passions for the work we do have died this year.
Many more whose names we do not know
are not sure how they will sustain their families, themselves.

I invite you to repeat after me:

We mourn the loss of livelihood.
We mourn the loss of livelihood.
We honor and remember the dreams now deferred.
We honor and remember the dreams now deferred.
We pray for sustenance and resilience.
We pray for sustenance and resilience.
Amen. **Amen.**

Loss of Love

We mourn this night the loss of love.
[light the third candle]

Some of us are encountering a loss of relationship in this moment.
We mourn the loss of imagined futures together.
We also mourn that it has become more and more difficult
to love others who are different from us.

I invite you to repeat after me:

We mourn a loss of love.
We mourn a loss of love.
We honor and remember the good moments and seek healing for the pain.
We honor and remember the good moments and seek healing for the pain.
We pray for compassion and change in our divided communities.
We pray for compassion and change in our divided communities.
Amen. **Amen.**

Loss of Liveliness

We mourn this night the loss of liveliness.
[light the fourth candle]

For so many, the last few years have sapped us
of our energy, our enthusiasm, and our sense of well-being.
We mourn the loss of of all who are suffering with anxiety and depression,
who are finding it difficult to live each day with fullness or to find hope for tomorrow.

I invite you to repeat after me:

We mourn this loss of liveliness.
We mourn this loss of liveliness.
We honor and remember that each person is precious and whole.
We honor and remember that each person is precious and whole.
We pray for recovery and renewed vigor.
We pray for recovery and renewed vigor.
Amen. **Amen.**

More Light

And now we light a fifth candle.
Just as we will do on Christmas Eve,
We light this as a sign of our belief
that the light does always come and is coming even now.
[light the fifth candle in the center]

This light casts its glow on all the surrounding prayers we have prayed.
This light resides within us, perhaps dim for a time,
but always lit–an ember of the Holy inside us.
This light reminds us that we are not alone.

Ritual of Hope

[Invite people to whatever ritual action you have decided on… lighting their own candles, placing luminaries, putting star ornaments on the tree, offering food donations, etc. This action can be accompanied by instrumental music or singers.

A couple of ideas of music (or simply play instrumental carols):

"Warm the Time of Winter"
(words by my friend Ruth Duck; choral/ensemble/soloist)
MV 71, listen HERE

"The Longest Night"
(by Peter Mayer; solo)
Listen and learn the song on guitar HERE
Buy the album HERE

[when it seems that all people who want to have had time to do the ritual action you prepared, proceed to a closing (add a familiar carol if you want more singing… if you have worship guides or projected words, you could use the Fanny Crosby lyrics that go with "Away in a Manger." See the end of this script for those)]

Closing

Thank you for pausing this evening to remember, to acknowledge, to mourn.
All of it is holy. All of it is part of this season when we pray for
hope, peace, joy, and love.

May you know that you are not alone.
If you, or someone you know, needs support,
we want to encourage connection and conversation.
It really does help.
If you need suggestions of ways to get support
for yourself or others, you can find that…

[create a list of ways to connect with resources through your church or with organizations in your community or online for grief support, mental health support, resource support, etc. You could create a QR code that points to a website page, simply have a printed list available, or invite people to connect with care ministers after the service if you have that resource]

So… stay as long as you like,
and then when you are ready, go into the night knowing
that the growing light of tomorrow will be with you
throughout this season and into the new year of continuing transition.

The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to shine upon you
and be gracious unto you;
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you,
and give you peace, both now and forever more. **Amen.**

[music is played as people linger or depart]

alternative song if you want:

“Beautiful Tree”
[to the tune of “Away in a Manger,” words by Fanny Crosby, adapted]

The heavens have planted a beautiful tree,
Whose evergreen branches our loved ones behold;
They walk ’neath its shade in the city above,
And bask in the light of the peace Christ foretold.

The hand of the Savior will wipe every tear,
And banish forever the darkness of night;
Sweet anthems eternal that region shall fill,
The Lord is its glory, the Lord is its light.

So rest in the beautiful tree full of life,
That stands in the midst of the city so fair;
And eat of its fruit and be healed with its leaves;
No hunger, no sickness, no sorrow is there.