

Overview of the Worship Scripts
from Dr. Marcia McFee

As I write this in August 2021, we are reeling from prolonged uncertainty and instability brought on by the pandemic. In the United States alone, millions lost their jobs and are affected by whether or not landlords will evict them from their homes for failure to pay rent. A staggering number of families are food insecure for the first time in their lives. And those who were already on the brink are even less sure how to survive. And we are all exhausted in some way. Even if it is decision-fatigue.

We have problems to address. And so did the Holy Family that night. An oppressive regime had demanded everyone upend their lives and hightail it to their home towns to register for the census–for tax purposes, likely. Mary was on the verge of giving birth and the AirBnB app just wasn't an option. Whether they got to town late or for some other reason, they had a housing problem that night.

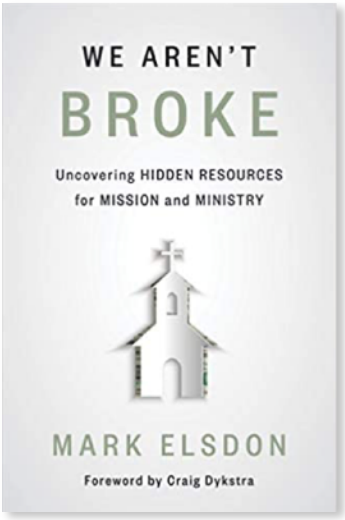
The Innkeeper is a figure of our imaginations. Not referenced in the sacred texts, we assume that since Luke said there was an "inn," then there must have been an "innkeeper." Often our stories cast him in a negative light, someone who banished a pregnant woman to where the animals were kept. But what if, since we are engaging our imaginations anyway, what if he was truly an entrepreneur? Someone who saw a problem and thought, literally, "outside the box" to solve the problem of where Mary could have her child? Instead of thinking "there's nowhere," he said to himself first, "there has to be somewhere."

This worship series was inspired by churches who are asking these kinds of questions. I was honored this year to be the recipient of a Lilly Grant that allowed me to interview churches that are seeking to transform their property assets into solutions for various community needs and strengthen their own viability in the process. Some are offering affordable office space to non-profits that work to alleviate society's problems, some are creating affordable housing, some after-school help, some food distribution. No one church can solve everything, but each one can do something. Just like the innkeeper. Housing the holy work of Divine Love can happen in many ways.

And so I invite you to spend this Advent and Christmas seeing your church's situation in a different light… the light of the Star of Bethlehem that shone that night on an unlikely house for the holy–a stable. It doesn't matter what state your church is in at the moment (and we are all feeling a bit uncertain about that at the moment). The Light of Christ is shining on you, inviting you to become a beacon of hope to others. What one thing could you do (or add to what you already do) that could alleviate someone's suffering? And how could this series inspire you to think bigger and beyond this holy-day season with purposeful solutions for your community housed in your church? We are called to "make room" in our inns–to create a welcoming space for the flourishing of humanity. That's what the inn, the stable, the manger, became that night.

This Overview will give you a sense of what are in the downloadable materials and the rhythms and content of the Order of Worship. In all my worship series this year in the Worship Design Studio, I will be focusing on giving you a baseline for adaptations you may decide to engage in this time of "metamorphosis" in the church. I believe it is a moment of unprecedented change and it may be that adaptations or additions to the "traditional" weekly worship pattern will become the norm. So I encourage you to be active on the Worship Design Studio website where churches are working collaboratively, sharing resources and ideas about how to move forward in such an uncertain time.

A special invitation:



As part of the preparation for thinking about "housing the holy" in this series, I have arranged for a special webinar in September with Mark Elsdon, the author of the new book, We Aren't Broke: Uncovering Hidden Resources for Mission and Ministry. We will post the recording of that webinar in this series resource on the Worship Design Studio website. I highly recommend inviting your key leaders (trustees, finance committee, lay leaders, etc) to study this book *before* the Advent season. There may be ideas and thoughts that begin to percolate that could be tended and talked about or even carried out during the Advent season. One of the best ways to discern change and possibility is to connect the conversations to spiritual inspiration and worship, and this series' theme is a great accompaniment to considering new ideas for "such a time as this."

Friends, I fervently and frequently pray that the Spirit fills you with strength, endurance, inspiration, rest, and uncanny and unexplained resilience for your lives and for your worshiping. I hope that these resources will help you, relieve you, inspire you for your Advent preparations. Together we can offer more room in The Inn of God's Love. Thank you for all you are, all you do, all you are holding in this time.

Peace & Passion,

Dr. Marcia McFee

Downloads
What's included and what to do with it

This Overview - have your whole team read this to get a good foothold on the theme and order

Scriptures and Synopses - this is your at-a-glance look at the movement of the series and the scriptures highlighted from the RCL

Six Worship Scripts - you WILL adapt these for your context (tip: do this in one fell swoop before the season begins and you'll feel amazingly prepared and your team will thank you)

Children's Time Scripts - decide who is doing this and get it into their hands early so they can have fun with it, adapt it, and connect it to what children are doing in other settings like education

Communion Script - incorporate this into whatever weeks you are doing communion as you adapt your weekly scripts

Sermon Fodder - scan it pre-season so you know what is there then use it to help jumpstart your own sermon preparation each week

Visual and Media Ideas - make some time early in your planning process to go through the ideas with your team and land on how you'll apply the main images to your space then get folks working on it (the earlier, the more fun they'll have)

Music Documents and Files - there are two original songs that repeat weekly ("thread items") so have your musicians try it out (or decide to use the recordings) and then get together to actually try them out as you adapt the scripts for your context

Logo and Trailer - put your own branding on these early (directions in the Visual and Media Ideas doc) so you can begin to get the word out pre-season

Adaptations Document - gather your key leaders, including beyond worship (education, mission), to talk about our ideas for various ways to make this theme accessible such as online, house church dinner groups, DIY meditations, experiential outdoor stations, multi-generational activities, etc. that you'll want to look at early to dream about and plan for the possibilities for your context



Order of Worship

This series is designed to give you everything you need–all words, hymn and song suggestions, anthem and band/soloist suggestions, leader introductions, etc. But also please know that if you want to adapt to fit your current order of worship, you can easily lift any of the suggested material out of my scripts and place it in your more familiar structure.

The order of worship is the same each week. This goes with the concept I teach that repetition is a good thing and a solid foundation is necessary in order to be creative within it. Doing series can give you the opportunity to try on a slightly different order of worship or a different way of doing an element of the service for a season but keep it the same during that season, therefore offering some sense of familiarity and a rhythm. We have included a communion prayer separately from the scripts so you can fit that in whenever you have communion. If you do communion weekly, adapt by using that script as a model for how you might edit according to the theme each week. As always, adapt the communion prayer to fit your tradition.

The “Anchor Image” (main metaphor) for the series is a door. You will see this image referenced throughout the liturgy. See the Visuals and Media document for ideas about adding a rustic door to your worship setting to highlight this theme’s messages and spiritual metaphors.

Prelude and Greetings

We Open the Door

(Threshold Moment)

This concept of a “threshold moment” that I teach introduces people to the journey and the theme of the day at the beginning of the service so that every part of the service is seen through that thematic lens. Advent has a natural “threshold moment” in the lighting of the Advent candles. I have couched that in some of the elements that Worship Design Studio churches have come to know well: theme song, spoken synopsis of the theme for the day, and a simple candle-lighting prayer that can be done by one or more voices. I am thrilled to be collaborating with composer Amanda Udis-Kessler on the theme song and prayer song for this series. Amanda’s music is so accessible. The congregation will learn these right away! We are including recordings (with vocals and without) for churches that need that kind of help.

The Peace

As the congregation rises for the opening hymn, they are invited to “wave” a sign of peace (still a good idea in this moment of lingering pandemic to keep this at a distance).

Opening Hymn/Song

We have chosen hymns (for more “traditional/classic” worship) and songs (for more “modern/contemporary” worship) as suggestions. But you can also feel free to adapt our suggestions if you choose. Just look at the hymns/songs we have chosen and try to find something that keeps the “essence of the message” but is something more beloved by your congregation. Here is the key to the abbreviations of songbooks we use:

GTG (Glory to God Hymnal, PCUSA)
ELW (Evangelical Lutheran Worship)
LW (Lutheran Worship)
UMH (United Methodist Hymnal, UMC)
NCH (New Century Hymnal, UCC)
Chalice (Chalice Hymnal, DOC)
VU (Voices United, United Church of Canada)
VT (Voices Together, Mennonite Church USA/Canada)
FWS/STF (Faith We Sing/Sing the Faith, UMC, PCUSA)
W&S = Worship & Song (UMC)
W&R = Worship & Rejoice!
SP&P = Sing Prayer and Praise
MV = More Voices
URW = Upper Room Worshipbook
CMP = Convergence Music Project
Songselect (the database of CCLI)

Children’s Time

Once again our frequent collaborator, Mark Burrows (“Mr. Mark”),
has created scripts for a time with children.

First Reading

This series utilizes the readings from the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C. You can see which ones we have chosen for first and second readings in the Scriptures and Synopses document. The prophets are used most frequently in this first reading because the common theme of caring for the poor and oppressed is so prominent in the Year C cycle.

Anthem/Song

Let us pray that by the Advent season, our choirs will be able to sing together once more! As with congregational song selections, we offer a classical/traditional choral option as well as a soloist/band-style option. You may wish to listen to the suggestions we made in the scripts and decide if they suit your choir or band. As always, please choose from your existing repertoire if that makes your preparation more doable. If you

are a small church with very limited music resources, be sure to stay tuned into this Series Resource in the Worship Design Studio website to see if other churches are sharing recorded resources (or go there to share your own)!

Second Reading

I have utilized the Common English Bible (CEB) translations in the worship scripts. Feel free to use other translations that you may prefer. And as you read through the scripts before the season, think about ways you might offer one of the scriptures creatively (in other words, not from the lectern every time): a short one could be unison, a longer one could be with multiple voices, a member of the choir could read one from their place in the choir just before or after the anthem, a dancer could choreograph based on one, make one a video with music and photos taken by the congregation, etc. Think about the talents in your congregation and plan accordingly!

Sermon

We are offering some insight from biblical scholars for each week to help jumpstart your sermon preparation. You could also choose to include “A Story of Innkeeping” in the scripts within your sermon rather than as a preface to the offering. Another sermon content idea is to give the history about the “Closing Carol” for each week within the sermon rather than before it is sung later in the service.

Prayers of the People

“Make of My Heart a Stable” is our prayer song for this series, beautifully composed by Amanda Udis-Kessler. I love the double-entendre of the word “stable” as the third line describes the place we are creating as “warm and sturdy.” Stability is something we all long for in the midst of uncertainty and the prayer sequence is designed to help us intercede on behalf of all who are feeling and experiencing instability at this time (including each of us).

The first verse of the song gives way to a brief breath prayer of letting go of regret. In the example recordings (I suggest you listen to these even if you don’t need to use the recordings for worship), you will hear how the music can continue softly under the breath prayer. Then verse two moves to “make of my life a stable,” and the prayer this time invites breathing out fear and breathing in courage. The third verse, “make of our church a stable,” concludes the prayer song and eases us into a time of extended prayer. You can choose to use the intercessory categories written in the scripts or use a form of prayer that feels more familiar to your congregation.

A Story of Innkeeping: Offering

The introduction to offering (even if you are not yet passing plates post-pandemic) is an opportunity to expand on the image of “The Inn” and the possibilities of how we might

make “more room in the Inn” that is our church. My fervent hope is that you will have figured out some extra special way to be connected to the needs of your community and can highlight those at the point in worship.

[Communion]

This is the place where you can insert the communion script I have written on the weeks when that is appropriate for your tradition. Again, please adapt what I have written (this one is based largely on the ecumenical standard from 2nd century Hippolytus prayer) as needed to fit your tradition of the prayer before communion. If you commune weekly, you may want to adapt the language I have written to include references from that week’s scripture or message.

Closing Carol

As I say in the scripts: “each week of this series we will close out with a Christmas Carol. Yes, Advent is not yet the birth of Christ. However, as we prepare our homes and this house for the Holy, we live in the “already and not yet.” We already know “the rest of the story” AND YET we have not seen the fulfillment of a time when suffering ends.” I understand the desire of some to keep Advent “pure” and not sing Christmas songs until Christmas. But personally, it seems a shame to hear them everywhere (including “muzak” in the stores) and not be singing them in our houses of worship! And waiting would be all fine and good IF we still had a strong “12-days of Christmas” tradition, which we don’t. Besides, the stories of these carols (and their missing verses) I have shared in this part of the service are so inspirational as they relate to our theme!

Benediction

The blessing at the end of the service is the same each week. Pastors, spend some time memorizing this so you can feel free to be at the “door” on the chancel for the first part and walk out to the congregation and stretch your arms wide on “may the Spirit lead you… making room in The Inn for ALL” part. You can do it!

May God’s Door of Welcome
swing open in your heart and in your life.

May Christ’s humble first dwelling
remind you of the plenty you already know.

And may the Spirit lead you into
more possibility and hospitality that you can imagine,
making room in The Inn for all.

May it be so for you.
May it be so for us.

May it be so for this church.
Amen.

Postlude

I hope this helps you get an at-a-glance feel for the scripts!

See the synopses for every worship experience in the series HERE

If you haven't purchased the series yet (free to WDS members), click HERE

If you'd like to get access to ALL our series, check out a Worship Design Studio subscription HERE