

Longest Night / Blue Christmas Resources

What is a Longest Night / Blue Christmas Service?

Culturally, the holiday season feels like it's supposed to be a time of merriment and cheer. But it's hard to be excited about Christmas when we're grieving the loss of a loved one who won't be with us this year, navigating new routines in the wake of divorce or other broken relationship, worrying about the future amid job loss or a health crisis, or any number of things that make the holidays more of a season of darkness than of light.

In recent years, many Christians have chosen to acknowledge these challenges of the season with Services of the Longest Night, also called Blue Christmas Services. The idea is to create a space to sit with the less cheerful emotions of the holidays, not to wallow in sadness but to find hope amidst the pain. Consider hosting your service around the winter solstice, Dec. 21: the longest night of the year. Use these resources to plan your service.

Welcome to the Longest Night

Tonight, we will have almost 16 hours of darkness. It is the longest night of the year. In the midst of this dark time, we are mindful of the dark periods of our lives: death, physical or mental illness, strained or broken relationships, job loss, or whatever else casts a shadow over our "merry" Christmas. So, we gather in sacred space with others who are hurting, acknowledging our shared longing for light and hope in the dark nights of our souls.

Call to Worship

Surrounded by festive sounds, bright and shiny decorations, and the constant buzz of activity,

We feel the darkness of our souls.

Many gather in joy and fellowship,

Yet we feel pain of loved ones no longer with us, and wounds from broken relationships.

In a world filled with hate, and a culture more concerned with selling to us than caring for us,

We desperately need your love, O Lord.

Our celebrations are muted by illnesses, disappointments, and personal tragedies,

Our hearts cry out to you, O Lord. Hear us and bring us peace. Amen.

Suggested Hymns

- Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus
- Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah
- O Come, O Come, Emmanuel
- O Little Town of Bethlehem
- View the Present through the Promise

Litany of Remembrance¹ (Lighting the Advent Wreath)

Leader: We light this first candle to remember those whom we have loved and lost.
We pause to remember clearly their faces, their voices, their bodies.
We embrace and give thanks for the memories that bind them to us in this season of expectation, when all Creation waits for the Light.

All: We remember them with love. May God's eternal love surround them.

The First Candle is lit, followed by a period of silent reflection.

Leader: We light this second candle to remember the pain of loss:
We acknowledge and embrace the pain of the past, O God, and we offer it to you, asking that into our wounded hearts and open hands you will place the gift of peace, shalom.

**All: We remember that through you all things are possible.
Refresh, restore, renew us, O God, and lead us into your future.**

The Second Candle is lit, followed by a period of silent reflection.

Leader: We light this third candle to remember ourselves this Christmas time.
We pause to remember the past weeks, months, and for some of us years, that have been heavy with our burdens.
We accept and lay before you, God, the sharpness of memory, the sadness and grief, the hurt and fear, the anger and pain.
We accept and lay before you the ways we feel we have fallen short, and the times we have spent blaming ourselves, and you, for all that we have suffered.
We accept and lay before you the times we have walked alone, in darkness; and in knowledge of our own mortality.

**All: We remember that though we have journeyed far, and that, while lost, we may have turned away from the light, the light itself has not failed.
We remember that though winter be upon us and though the night be dark,
with the turning of the wheel the dawn will come, and dawn defeats the darkness.**

The Third Candle is lit, followed by a period of silent reflection.

Leader: We light this fourth candle to remember faith, the gift of light and hope that God offers to us in the stories of Hanukkah and Christmas,

which both also began in abandonment, insecurity, and humbleness, in a time of war and in a poor stable.

We remember that the loving God who kept the light shining in the temple and who came to share this life with us promises us comfort and peace.

¹ Adapted from a "Blue Christmas" service developed and used at The Cathedral Church of Saint Andrew, Honolulu, Hawaii.

All: We remember the One who shares our burdens, who shows us the way to the light, and who journeys with us into all our tomorrows.

The Fourth Candle is lit, followed by a period of silent reflection.

Prayers of the People²

Leader: God of wisdom, we come to you this Christmas season tired, in turmoil, and in pain. As the nights have grown longer, so has darkness grown and wrapped itself around our hearts. In this season of longest night, we ask your healing blessings upon all that we carry in our hearts—sorrow we fear may never end, wounds we cannot even put into words. Lord, hear our prayer.

All: And in your merciful love, answer.

Leader: God of mercy and compassion, there are those among us who are grieving over what might have been. Death or loss or terrible hurt has changed our experience of Christmas. We remember that once it was a special day for us, too, but someone or something precious has gone away from us in this life. We have lost a beloved, a job, a goal, a cause, a dream. We find ourselves adrift and alone. We are weary from the journey, and we have found no room at the inn. We come to you seeking rest, and peace, and shelter from the storm. Lord, hear our prayer.

All: And in your merciful love, answer.

Leader: God of grace, in the spirit of the season, grant us all that we need to comfort us as we journey through this Christmas season. We ask that you shelter and sustain all those of us, both here and throughout the world, who wander or want or weep or are heavy laden, that we may be lifted up in courage and journey on in thy peace. Lord, hear our prayer.

All: And in your merciful love, answer.

Leader: God of love, in this Christmas season we embrace and offer up to you all that used to be which is now lost with us, and cannot be again. With celebration all around us, memories of what was, and fears of what may be, weigh heavy on our hearts. Please, hold us close in your embrace, be near to us this night, until the light returns and the morning comes.

All: And in your merciful love, answer.

Leader: Keep watch, dear Lord, with those who work, or watch, or weep this night, and give thine angels charge over those who sleep. Tend the sick, Lord; give rest to the weary, bless the dying, soothe the suffering, pity the afflicted, shield the joyous; and all for thy love's sake. Amen.

Prayers of the People³

Christ our Savior, born for us, bring healing and peace to all people.
Lord, have mercy. **Christ, have mercy.**

Christ, baptized in the Jordan, give hope to all who come to you.

² Adapted from a "Blue Christmas" service developed and used at The Cathedral Church of Saint Andrew, Honolulu, Hawaii.

³ The Methodist Worship Book, The British Methodist Church.

Lord, have mercy. **Christ, have mercy.**

Christ, tested in the desert, give courage to those who are tempted.
Lord, have mercy. **Christ, have mercy.**

Christ, who comforted and healed, bring wholeness to all who are broken.
Lord, have mercy. **Christ, have mercy.**

Christ, who hung in agony on the cross, bring strength to those who suffer.
Lord, have mercy. **Christ, have mercy.**

Christ, who died to save us, give peace to all who face death.
Lord, have mercy. **Christ, have mercy.**

Christ, raised from the tomb, bring light and life to all the world.
Lord, have mercy. **Christ, have mercy.**

Christ, present among your disciples, unite all your people in love.
Lord, have mercy. **Christ, have mercy.**

The grace of Christ attend us, the love of God surround us, and the Holy Spirit keep us, this day and forever. **Amen.**

Suggested Readings

Words of Heartbreak and Hope

Alternate these readings, to remind hearers that scripture puts our heartbreak into words and responds with words of hope. Consider having two readers speaking from either end of the altar space as a form of call and response.

Words of Heartbreak

Psalm 22:1-2, 14-15
Job 3:1-5
Jeremiah 8:18, 21-9:1

Words of Hope

Isaiah 9:2, 6-7
Matthew 11:28-29
Isaiah 11:1-10

Selections from Psalm 22, read responsively

My God, my god, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from helping me, so far from the words of my groaning?
**O my God, I cry by day but you do not answer,
and by night, but I find no rest.**
In you, our ancestors trusted. They trusted and you delivered them.

**It was you who brought me from the womb,
you who kept me safe on my mother's breast.
Since my mother bore me, you have been my God.**
Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help.
God does not despise the affliction of the afflicted.

**God does not hide from me.
When I cry to God, God hears me.
Thanks be to God.**

Other Scriptures to Consider

Job 3:1-11
Psalm 121
John 1:1-5 (consider reading as a benediction)

Visual Reminders of Light and Hope

Here are four ways to visualize light and hope amidst the darkness in tangible and memorable acts:

1. Give congregants a candle (battery operated or wax) as they enter worship. During the closing hymn, invite them to bring their candle to the altar, light it, and leave it there. Have those candles remain present for Christmas Eve worship.
2. Order blue battery-operated tea light candles and spell out the word "HOPE" on a table at the entrance to the sanctuary. As congregants depart, invite them to take a candle and place it in a prominent place during their Christmas celebrations (at an empty seat where a deceased loved one might have sat, on the bedside table after a romantic relationship has painfully ended, on the mantle to keep hope in Christ amidst challenges of health, financial strain, difficult life transitions, or another dark reality of life.
3. One year, I preached on Isaiah 11:1-10, telling the story of how my grandparents once had to cut down a large tree just outside their kitchen window. Instead of grinding down the stump, they chose to leave several feet of trunk, up to the first sturdy branch. Then, they trimmed that branch down and hung a bird feeder on it. For years after that, they sat at their kitchen table and watched birds of all kinds come and go. They turned the death of one tree into a life-giving, life-sustaining oasis for dozens of birds.

That year, I placed large tree stump right in the middle of the narthex of the church. It disrupted the normal foot traffic and required people to walk around it. During the service, I arranged for someone to place a bucket of beautiful white roses on top of the stump. Then, during the benediction, I invited people to look for signs of growth and hope to come from the ugly, dead stumps in their lives. As they left, an usher was there to hand each person a white rose that was now "growing" from the stump.

4. Another year, I preached on the angels who proclaimed good news of great joy to the shepherds in the field. Following the service, congregants were invited to choose a beautiful glass angel ornament off a small table top tree in the back of the sanctuary, as a reminder that God's angels are messengers of strength and hope to sustain us until Christ's holy and joyous presence is once again felt in our lives.