



OUT OF TIME

ADVENT 2023

LITURGY FOR
THE LONGEST
NIGHT

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INTRODUCTION

Longest Night is a type of service that emerged in recent practice in the Northern Hemisphere. It is offered on or near the winter solstice, when the darkness of the winter season stretches to its furthest limit, and it provides a time of worship for those who struggle during the holiday season. This liturgy also goes by the names Darkest Night or Blue Christmas.

Longest Night creates a pocket dimension in the pre-Christmas season. Just as the secular world ramps up its frenetic merriment in the week before Christmas, Longest Night arrives with a liturgy that protects a window of time in which the assembly can step outside the Christmas countdown and acknowledge that we don't, and can't, always meet the mandate for holiday joy.

Liturgies like Longest Night are often designed with those who are grieving in mind, especially those who are navigating their first holiday without a beloved. But others are drawn in, too. This is also a liturgy for those who cannot go home for the holidays, for those who struggle with loneliness, for those whose brains slip toward depression in the winter season or in any other, for those for whom—for any reason—darkness and quiet and candlelight come as a bit of relief in the midst of the commercial Christmas blare.

OPENING DIALOG

Tonight the earth tilts and tips, its axis pulling this half of the world away from the sun.

This is the longest night.

The shadows lengthen. The darkness lingers. Those we love don't always notice, but it's true:

this is the longest night.

Tonight, we bring to God what weighs on us in the small hours.

This is the longest night.

This gathering darkness is not a threat but a shelter, a time to name what is true:

Sometimes joy doesn't come easily.

Yet God still meets us.

Sometimes merriness is not within reach.

Yet God still meets us.

Sometimes despair doesn't depart at dawn.

Yet God still meets us.

Come, bring your whole selves to God.

God's arms are open wide.

1 In the morn-ing when I rise, in the morn-ing when I rise,
 2 Dark . . . mid-night was my cry, dark . . . mid-night was my cry,
 3 Just a - bout the break of day, just a - bout the break of day,
 4 Oh, . . . when I come to die, oh, . . . when I come to die,
 5 And . . . when I want to sing, and . . . when I want to sing,

in the morn-ing when I rise, give me Je - sus.
 dark . . . mid-night was my cry, give me Je - sus.
 just a - bout the break of day, give me Je - sus.
 oh, . . . when I come to die, give me Je - sus.
 and . . . when I want to sing, give me Je - sus.

Refrain

Give me Je - sus, give me Je - sus.

You may have all the rest, give me Je - sus.

LIGHTING THE FIRST CANDLE

The shadows lengthen.

The evening is here.

This is the darkest night of the year.

**Let our faith flicker
against our incomprehension.**

The first candle is lit.

THANKSGIVING FOR BAPTISM

The apostle Paul wrote to the church in Rome: “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?” Do you not know—that death is part of the life we receive at this font? That one thing has to end so that something else can begin?

Yes, we do know: Death is tied to life. Sadness rubs shoulders with joy. Gift is tangled with loss.

“If we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him,” Paul told the church in Rome. This font delivers us into an in-between time:

a time when our sin is drowned, yet still makes ripples; a time when new life is ours, but has not yet arrived.

But as the angels said to the shepherds: do not be afraid. The waters of this small font are big enough to hold the ocean of God’s promise. They are deep enough to contain the complexity of our life with Christ. They are wide enough to wash over everything you are: sinner and saint, dreamer and mourner, entirely human and image of God. The moment of our baptism holds the eternity of God’s grace.

Amen.

LIGHTING THE SECOND CANDLE

Small stars glow above.

We ponder the signs here today.

We await news of the Savior born far away.

**Stars whisper old light
on a night of new love.**

The second candle is lit.

PSALM 91

PRAYER

Creator of the stars of night, you have established your faithfulness in heaven itself. You are still as the North Star and steadfast as the dawn. Reveal yourself where we least expect you: in the longest night, in the most difficult times, in the sheer silence when words fail us. Faithful One, abide with us every moment.

Amen.

LIGHTING THE THIRD CANDLE

Candlelight leaps upward.

We raise our hearts to God.

The Spirit's wings are open broad.

Hover over chaos;

speak your holy Word.

The third candle is lit.

READING

ROMANS 8:18-27

The sufferings of the present time are not worth comparing to the glory about to be revealed; the Spirit intercedes on our behalf.

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

HOMILY

LIGHTING THE FOURTH CANDLE

In quiet dimness,

Heartbeats keep time.

In deepening vigil, we wait for a sign.

Jesus, end our waiting.

Come into our midst.

The fourth candle is lit.

PRAYERS

This prayer format encourages the assembly to offer extemporaneous petitions in response to the leader's prompts.

These petitions are easily adaptable to a more familiar format in which the petitions are offered by a worship leader and the assembly concludes each one with a recurring phrase.

Trustworthy God, God who knows us, we pray to you.

We pray over our yesterday.

Here people may pray for every burden they have carried from yesterday into today.

We pray over the day that has been.

Here people may pray in thanksgiving for what they have experienced, in sadness for what they have lost, or in acceptance of their finitude for that which they could not complete.

This longest night, we pray over the season and this turning world.

Here people may pray for circumstances awaiting daylight and hope: for those struggling through the holidays, for places of environmental suffering, for situations of crisis and despair.

We pray for our tomorrows, as many as we may receive.

Here people may pray for what they hope for tomorrow.

We pray for all things out of season: This grief that we carry that separates us from those who feel merry; The impatience that drives us forward in a season of waiting; or the centering peace we draw from you in this frantic world; And the great day of your joy, which will come when it comes—never too soon, never when we expect, not in the way we have planned. We offer these prayers in the name of Jesus Christ, the One for whom we wait, who taught us to pray . . .

LORD'S PRAYER

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 us 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 the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.

LIGHTING THE FIFTH CANDLE

Some sigh with impatience.

Others pray in relative peace.

God, you illuminate gently;

you light our way

with a quiet transcendence.

The fifth candle is lit. During the singing of the hymn, everyone is invited to come and light a candle or write a note on our prayer wall.



- 1 O come, O come, Em - man - u - el, and ran - som cap - tive
 2 O come, O Wis - dom from on high, em - brac - ing all things
 3 O come, O come, O Lord of might, as to your tribes on
 4 O come, O Branch of Jes - se, free your own from Sa - tan's



Is - ra - el, that mourns in lone - ly ex - ile here
 far and nigh: in strength and beau - ty come and stay;
 Si - nai's height in an - cient times you gave the law
 tyr - an - ny; from depths of hell your peo - ple save,



un - til the Son of God ap - pear.
 teach us your will and guide our way. Re-joyce! Re-joyce!
 in cloud, and maj - es - ty, and awe.
 and give them vic - t'ry o'er the grave.



Em - man - u - el shall come to you, O Is - ra - el.

LIGHTING THE SIXTH CANDLE

A circle of flame grows;

so do our prayers.

We do not rush the dawn, nor do we despair.

We rest in God's warm presence

as we prepare for our repose.

The sixth candle is lit.

BENEDICTION

As you leave this time of worship and step into the remaining hours of this night, take with you the peace of Jesus Christ, who existed from the first instant of eternity, and waited nine months in Mary's womb; who counted off the first moments of creation, and spent three days among the dead; who lived thirty-some years in a timebound body, and says, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

Go with the blessing of the triune God, Creator of all time, Savior of our days, + Mender of every moment.

Amen.

May the spirit of our Lord be with us this night,

And with our absent brothers and sisters in Christ.

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