GREETING:

ADVENT WREATH:

*Leader:* All through the season of Advent as we prepared for Christmas, we’ve been exploring how we as a church can “make more room in the inn,” becoming more hospitable to the needs of our community.On this Christmas Eve, we declare that The Inn is open for the business of compassion with room enough for all! The long-awaited Messiah has been born and on him the light shines. We have only to open the doors of our lives and say “welcome.” Our Advent journey has led us to this moment when the light shining through the closed doors of life becomes an open door to new possibilities, new relationships. What a poignant moment for us this year as the light–the hope, peace, joy and love–multiplies from one illuminated heart and hand to another.

*(PLAY SONG)*

Tonight we offer the Lights of Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love

to illumine the Door of Welcome.

And we add the brightest light of all… the Light of the Newborn Jesus.

It shines bright like the star that rose over Bethlehem.

May this light also shine in our hearts, in our lives, and in our church.

May this light awaken us to possibilities and lead us to greater hospitality.

There *IS* room in this Inn, a House for the Holy.

*(Play Song)*

THE PEACE:

The Light of Christ be with you!

**And also with you.**

As we rise in body or spirit for our opening hymn, I invite you to pass a “wave” of peace to the people around you (and, if you’re at home, I invite you to pass a wave to one another).

OPENING SONG:

Joy to the World

CHILDREN’S TIME:

We’ve spent this whole Advent season preparing our hearts and minds for the coming of Jesus. And now it’s Christmas Eve. There is still just a little more time to prepare by making room in our lives for what matters most.

Let’s start with our call-and-response.

I will say something and then you respond each time with – We make room for Jesus.

And as you do, you can rub circles into your heart.

Let’s try your part.

Excellent. Now I’ll provide the call. Here we go.

Make room for family. Make room for friends.

**We make room for Jesus.**

Make way for love that never ends.

**We make room for Jesus.**

Make room for others who need a hand.

**We make room for Jesus.**

Make room to listen, to understand.

**We make room for Jesus.**

Amen.

Tonight we have a big box with us.

On the first Sunday of Advent, we explored hope. When we have hope we can see a world of possibilities.

On the second Sunday of Advent, we imagined the Table of Peace, a table where everyone has a place.

On the third Sunday of Advent, we talked about a Drum of Joy playing some of the joyful rhythms of the season.

On the fourth Sunday of Advent, we had a box that was a crib, a baby bed, prepared for a new arrival.

Tonight is Christmas Eve, an evening of wonder and light. And there are still so many things our box can be, so many possibilities. I wonder what we could do to make it a welcome place for the holy family.

I know! We could make it into a fort. *[You can stand the box on one end if that makes it taller. If the box is more cube-like, open up the flaps to make it seem taller.]*

I wonder if this fort will let the holy family inside.

*[Invite a child to come knock on the fort.]*

Hmm. I guess not. A fort is designed to keep some in and others out.

I know! How about a nice, sturdy wall?

*[Turn the box lengthwise and invite another child to come knock.]*

Apparently not. A wall is really more for keeping some people on one side, and some people on the other side. But what about an inn? People stay at inns all the time.

*[Turn the box to where the top is facing the congregation, but the flaps are closed. Invite a third child to come knock.]*

*[Listening]* I don’t hear any footsteps. It doesn’t sound like anyone’s coming to open the door. I was so sure there would be room at the inn. I mean, it’s called an “inn” and here we are…out.

But we need a place for our holy family. All those years ago, there was one place that was open. Do you remember what it was? *[Hopefully, the children will say, “A stable,” or “Manger,” or “Barn.”]*

A stable. There was room in the stable.

*[Open the flaps to look like open doors.]*

What beautiful, wondrous open doors. We open the doors of our buildings and our hearts, it’s not just to let others in, but to let the light out – the light of hope, peace, joy, and love. The light that says:

We are open.

There is room.

You are welcome.

You have a place here.

THE PROPHESY: *Isaiah 9:2-7*

HYMN: *O Come, All Ye Faithful*

THE STORY*: Luke 2:1-7*

ANTHEM*: The Manger Is Stranger*

SERMON:

 I have a creche, just like this one in my home. Even more cutsie.

* Angel wearing a t-shirt that says “Harold.”
* Animals are so clean
* Kings
* Shepherd
* Joseph and Mary
  + Don’t look overwhelmed
  + Smiles
  + “heavenly peace”

I DON’T BUY IT!

Song “Away in a Manger…” “no crying he makes.” Really? How else would Jesus let Mary know when he was hungry? Baby’s don’t cry because they are “bad;” they cry because they need to communicate their needs.” If Jesus was fully God and fully human, as the church teaches, then Jesus cried.

So there was crying in the stable that night.

Animals

* Our scenes have a few, and there’s plenty of room for them. Imagine the scene more crowded.
* Dirtier… dirt in the sheep’s wool. Chickens. Goat or cow (status).
* Noises and smells

So it was crowded and noisy and smelly.

Mary and Joseph wouldn’t have been alone for the birth. Joseph had never been taught what to do. A local woman would have been brought over to help Mary. Someone who had done this before.

I wonder why she isn’t included in our nativity scenes?

Jesus’ entry into this world wasn’t quite like we often imagine. It was messy and crowded and smelly and scary… but it was beautiful and miraculous all the same. We don’t have to clean up or tame the story for it to fill us with wonder.

Jesus did not come into a perfect world. He came into our world. That’s the miracle that we miss when we clean up the story.

HYMN: What Child Is This?

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE:

(Gather prayer requests…)

(Verse 1)

In this moment we open the doors of our hearts to honesty before God

about what we’ve done and left undone that created less joy in a hurting world.

Let us breathe out this regret… *[pause to breathe out]*

and breathe in the life-giving, for-giving Spirit of God… *[pause to breath in]*

and out again with the Peace of Christ… *[another breath out].*

*(Verse 2)*

In this moment we open the doors of our lives to the call of the Spirit,

inviting us to become more than we can ask or imagine.

Let us breathe out our fear… *[pause to breathe out]*

and breathe in the courage of the Spirit of God… *[pause to breath in]*

and out again, with the Peace of Christ… *[another breath out].*

*(Verse 3)*

In this moment we open the doors of this church, filling it with

the compassion of Christ for all those who are struggling.

We remember and pray for…

*[continue with prayers in the manner that best suits your community or use the following intercessions with silent pauses between]*

… those who are suffering economic hardship, and insecurity in basic needs;

may abundance be shared.

… those who are suffering mentally, finding it difficult to cope;

may paths open and hope return.

… those who are suffering illness or injury;

may healing abound.

…. those who are suffering loneliness and isolation;

may companionship and solace arrive.

… those who are suffering discrimination, fear and violence;

may they know respect, respite, and safety.

May the Advent of Compassion be born in us,

reside within us,

move outward from us,

to meet the needs of the world,

making a house for the Holy that is each and every child of God.

We pray this in the name of Jesus, who taught us to pray

*[The Prayer of Jesus]*

STORY CONTINUES:After Jesus was born, the visitors began to show up to his birthplace, spurred by the message of the angels. But what we know is that in the presence of Jesus there are no visitors, we are all family with a place reserved for each one of us… *[continue with any other invitational language that is appropriate for your tradition].* And so, let us hear about those who gathered and join them in the presence of Jesus:

*LUKE 2:8-20*

OFFERING:

Imagine living in Bethlehem at the time of Jesus’ birth. Little town with a big expectation! As we heard, the prophet Micah, hundreds of years earlier, had predicted that a baby would be born in this “least significant” place, one that would “surely become great.” This was part of the sacred texts of the people and surely something that everyone, including the Innkeeper, in Bethlehem knew about. But did they believe it? Did they believe that something great, a peaceful ruler, would come from their town? Perhaps not enough to realize the possibilities of a pregnant woman on their doorstep that night. Do we believe that we are capable of birthing something life-changing for the people in our community? As the Body of Christ, could we live with more expectation of what is possible? Could we look more closely at what is right in front of us?

CLOSING CAROL:

Friends, this is the moment we’ve been waiting for. This is the moment we missed so much last year. Yes, we found ways to “pass the light” from one to another across the distance, knowing that nothing could extinguish the light of God in this world, knowing that Christ was with us and will always be. But oh, how good it is to be in this Holy House together. And for those who are watching online, we feel you, we know you are there, we are so glad that you join us in this moment with a candle lit at your own holy house. The Spirit makes it possible for us to be connected, as we found out last year. Let us sing this beloved song, Silent Night, that has been present through two centuries of ups and downs, steadfast in its message that the light still shines.

*\*Silent Night*

I invite you to turn and face the doors of this church for the Benediction before extinguishing your light. As you turn, see the lighted faces of this gathered community and know that you belong in this family of love.

BENEDICTION:

As you go out into the world this night…

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 than 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.