

# Freedom Bound

compiled by Ken Beidle

**T**he Advent season is a time of reflection on how God's coming in Jesus releases us from personal, social, and historical chains that bind us. The theme for this Advent–Epiphany season is “Freedom Bound.” We live in the paradox that we are both bound and free, on a march to freedom but encumbered by the burden and sin we carry; we are carrying the scars of struggle but living with a new hope. God's freedom takes us down pathways of justice, mercy, trust, love, service and inclusion. “Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths” (Psalm 25:4).

## PERMISSION TO PHOTOCOPY

Subscribers to *Leader* are welcome to photocopy worship materials in this section.

## DOWNLOAD

*Leader* subscribers may download the quarterly worship resources at [www.leaderonline.org/worship](http://www.leaderonline.org/worship). The Fall 2015 username is **Advent15** and the password is **trp2546**. They are both case sensitive.

brought to our continent against their will. The desire for dignity, release from unfair labor conditions, freedom from physical violence, and the right to advocate for change marked the civil rights movement. For Aboriginals/Native Americans in both Canada

and the United States, the arrival of European immigrants caused suffering, death, and forced resettlement. Living with that legacy of hurt and pain with those who suffered most takes us on a journey of solidarity and healing.

Whether from imprisonment in Roman jails (Paul's letters), or from exile in Babylon (the context of the Prophets), or from the second-class citizenship of Jews in first-century Palestine ruled by Rome (the Gospels), our Advent–Epiphany Scriptures speak to us of people struggling to live in difficult political, social, and personal situations. In our North American context, it is impossible to think of freedom without bringing to mind the experience of African slaves

and the United States, the arrival of European immigrants caused suffering, death, and forced resettlement. Living with that legacy of hurt and pain with those who suffered most takes us on a journey of solidarity and healing.

When we hear the Advent Scriptures within this context longing for freedom, Jeremiah's words in the first week of Advent to a beleaguered people take on new meaning. “I will fulfill the promise . . . [to] execute justice and righteousness in the land” (Jeremiah 33:15). Jesus also inspires in his hearers a sense of God's inbreaking freedom when he urges his listeners to an alert activism for “your redemption is drawing near” (Luke 21:28).

These Scriptures confront us. Just as the biblical prophets addressed their own people's sin with a message of judgment, mercy, and hope, so also these texts address us and call us to conversion. Our lives, neighbors, church, and family members are touched by class inequity, the lack of resources that lead the vulnerable to slide into deep poverty, and the racial injustice of Ferguson, Missouri. Many of us—once immigrants to Canada and the United States—are now a part of a historical legacy of trauma and mistreatment of Aboriginals/Native Americans. Our churches struggle to stay together as we look across the barriers of theological, class, cultural, and urban/rural divides. The reality is that we are not free. We are bound by prejudice through racial and cultural misunderstandings and our own egocentric ways of seeing the world.

“Freedom Bound,” this worship resource for Advent–Epiphany, invites us to see with bifocal vision: to have one eye on ourselves and the world and another eye on the Scriptural stories that, with the Spirit's help, can enliven and deepen our faith.

Advent is typically seen as a season of waiting, but with all that God has yet to do through us we cannot be satisfied with a passive waiting. Our waiting is active, full of energy, lamenting, mindful of suffering, and hope filled. Advent is a time set aside for spiritual renewal, a time to develop a more robust and resilient faith.

Freedom is coming! The restless prophets of old, John the Baptist, Elizabeth and John, Mary and Joseph, and Jesus himself sing this same song of God's longing for mercy and justice for all. Will we join them singing on the paths of justice, mercy, trust, love, service, and inclusion? Will we confront the parts of ourselves that keep us from hearing the clarion call to freedom? To his listeners in the gospel of John who heed his teaching, Jesus says, "You will know the truth and the truth will make you free" (John 8:32). What truth are we being asked to see more clearly? What obstacles in God's path to freedom are we being asked to put aside so that we may abound in love? Then, alive in the Spirit, we too may become communities of joy and peace sharing God's song of grace with the world.

"Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved" (Psalm 80:7). Our Scripture texts shine a light on the sins that bind us; they point the spotlight on those on the margins and call us to the gospel way of freedom.

### Guidelines for Worship Planning

The resources are organized around five major movements of worship: gathering, praising God, hearing God's Word, responding to the Word, and sending. Congregations can choose where to include such elements as praying, collecting the offering, sharing, announcements, and special music.

The worship resources provided for each Sunday are the bare bones of a service: suggestions for worship planners and leaders to start their planning. Fill in, adjust, edit, or discard what is provided so that your own congregation's worship is deepened.

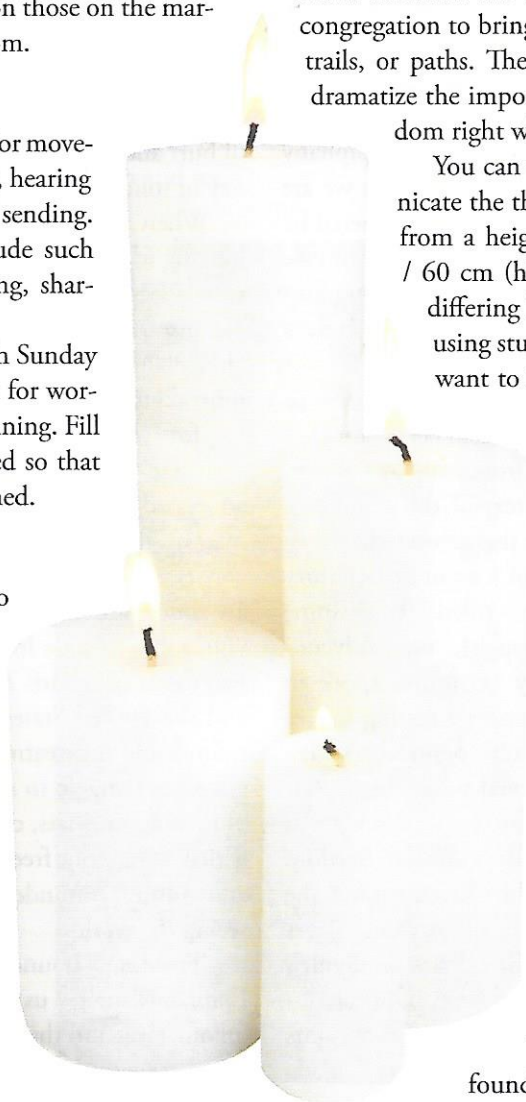
### Visuals for the Season

It is suggested that planners attempt to visually create a road or pathway in the worship space. This pathway can be a focal point for worship to dramatize the way that we are moving toward a deeper realization of God's freedom. A large color printout of a roadway can be used as a focal point in the worship space. Images of roadways can be downloaded from various Internet photography sites, some of which provide free photos, such as Everystockphoto, Flickr, Creative Commons, Dreamstime, and Shutterstock.

## Freedom is coming! The restless prophets of old, John the Baptist, Elizabeth and John, Mary and Joseph, and Jesus himself sing this same song of God's longing for mercy and justice for all.

Depending on your congregations' resources and worship space, consider these different ways of adding to the visual experience of the theme. You could ask an artist to do a sketch/image on a large piece of paper of a roadway that could be placed on an easel up front. If a congregation has photographers who are willing to invest some time, another possibility would be to ask them to take pictures of roads around the church and to put those images of roads together in a collage that could serve as an additional visual for the season. Or you could ask members of the congregation to bring in pictures that they have taken of roads, trails, or paths. These personal pictures of local roads would dramatize the importance of living the theme of Christ's freedom right where we live, work, and worship.

You can also rely on a visual altarscape to communicate the theme. Build an ascending set of four boxes from a height of 8 in. / 20 cm (lowest box) to 2 ft. / 60 cm (highest box). You can build these boxes of differing heights by stacking books of similar sizes, using sturdy cardboard boxes, or using wood. If you want to hide the boxes, cover them with one large piece of fabric. Place the candles in and around the boxes and weave a purple cloth around the candles to symbolize the path of the season. Drape four separate metal chains on the boxes and around the candles. The chains woven through the altarscape lament the reality that there are many things that keep us from walking freely on the road. They dramatize what is still keeping us tied down and encumbered in our walk with God. We are not there yet but we are on the way. The roads of justice, mercy, trust, love, service, and inclusion are ways that we move toward God. In Advent we are walking, moving, traveling toward greater freedom even as we loosen ourselves from the chains that bind us. Pictures of the altarscape can be found at [www.leaderonline.org](http://www.leaderonline.org).



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the chains that bind us.**

If you choose to make a banner, you could pursue various options. The words of the theme “Freedom Bound” could be illustrated as intertwined with chains. Alternately, a small group could make a Wordle with the word *freedom* for a visual. A Wordle is a visual map of a word with its accompanying meanings and associations. For examples, see [www.wordle.net](http://www.wordle.net).

### **Including Children in Worship**

Planners for the Advent–Epiphany season can begin by thinking of ways to incorporate children’s gifts and contributions to worship. Children can be asked to read Scripture, carry microphones for sharing time, play special music and accompany during congregational singing, greet and hand out bulletins, and collect the offering. Ideas for the children’s time will be offered that congregational worship planners can flesh out and develop.

- Children can be taught the signs for the theme song and liberation prayer and can be asked to come up front and help lead the congregation. (Video available on [www.leaderonline.org](http://www.leaderonline.org).)
- Real-life stories of adults and children who faced persecution and challenges while working for peace and justice may offer a way to enter the themes of the season. The stories of Rosa Parks and Ruby Bridges might be of particular interest to U.S. congregations. Book suggestions for children’s time can be found at [www.leaderonline.org](http://www.leaderonline.org). These

stories can help to explore the ideas presented, including chains of injustice, judging others, fear, violence/hate, selfishness, and exclusion.

- Each Sunday, children could be given a symbol of justice, mercy, trust and love, and service and inclusion that they could take home with them to put on their Christmas tree.
- Children’s time could be a time of collecting a special offering that could emphasize giving to others during this season (local organizations, Mennonite Central Committee, Heifer Project).

### **Music and Theme Song**

Unless otherwise noted, all suggested songs are found in *Hymns for A Worship Book (HWB)*, *Sing the Journey (STJ)*, or *Sing the Story (STS)*. Preservice singing can be a time to introduce unfamiliar songs that will be included in the worship service. It can also be a time to sing familiar carols of the season. During the praising God time, congregations are encouraged to sing at least three to five songs each week so there will be ample opportunity to lift hearts and voices to God in adoration and praise.

“There Is More Love Somewhere” (*STJ* 109), an African American spiritual, is the suggested theme song. It captures the resilience and hope of slaves struggling for freedom. It is full of lament for what is not yet. It encourages us to look and work for what God is yet going to do. “I’m gonna keep on ’til I find it.”

It can be sung each week in a different way: as a solo, by ensemble, or with the entire congregation. One way to deepen the congregation’s experience of the song is to learn hand motions (based on sign language) that accompany the words of the song. A video resource ([www.leaderonline.org](http://www.leaderonline.org)) has been provided for leaders. In addition to the theme song, there is also a suggestion for a song during the candle-lighting ritual that goes with the theme for each Sunday.

### **Opening and Closing Words**

The call to worship, opening prayer, and benedictions highlight the theme each week by incorporating words of Scripture from the week’s lectionary texts. Many congregations light Advent candles at the beginning of the service. It is suggested that the large Advent candles be lit as before the service begins each Sunday. Following the children’s time and sermon, the congregation

invited into a time of reflection and response that includes a time of silence and/or a musical interlude, a reading, an invitation to light a candle, and a congregational prayer.

### Preaching

The preaching task during this season is to serve the overall theme of the series—leading the congregation into revelations of the greater freedom God longs for each of us to experience. Surrounded by other special elements in the service, such as dramatic readings, songs, and candle lighting, a concise and clearly focused sermon will contribute to the overall effectiveness of worship if it is shorter than usual. As the sermon explores the theological theme of the season, it serves a significant interpretive and integrative role, making space for reflection on the mystery of God’s freedom and inviting a response of commitment to God’s way of justice and peacemaking in the world.

### Rituals for Advent–Epiphany season

#### Prayer/peace walk in your community

Churches sometimes plan Christmas caroling or other special events during this season. Consider planning a time during the Advent season when you walk the roads and streets around your church in an intentional time of praying. This time could be focused on a concern or issue that is facing the larger community where your church is located. This may provide an opportunity to connect with other groups in your community who share similar concerns.

#### Creating paper chains

On the first or second Sunday of Advent, hand out strips of paper of various colors (4 x 1 in. / 9.5 x 2 cm wide). Create a time during the service when you give people an opportunity to write down attitudes/habits/personal issues that keep them “chained” in their walk with God. Have a time of offering these barriers/chains to God for healing. Create chains of paper with these strips by intertwining them (into many chains or several long chains) and visually display them in the worship area.

#### Lighting candles: an act of prayer and solidarity

Just as the movement for greater justice and peace happens in community action and solidarity, so too this ritual of moving

together in concert with others and God helps us imagine the freedom that comes in Christmas. This ritual is intentionally placed toward the end of the service so that people will grasp the importance of carrying the light of Christ’s freedom into the world.

Purchase small candles that people can take and light from the Christ candle. Fill a container (garden pots/metal trays with sides at least 2 in. / 4 cm high) with sand. Place the sand containers on the same table or near the altar. After the candles are lit they can be placed in the sand containers. In large congregations this ritual may need to be adapted as it may not be possible for everyone to light a candle.

Following the sermon, provide a moment for quiet reflection on the themes of Scripture and sermon. Consider having an instrumental accompaniment of the song that will be sung later during the time of candle lighting (a song is suggested for each week). The reading before the candle-lighting ritual incorporates prayers and words of confession. This reading is written for two voices, but it can be read by as many people as desired. The “Prayer for Liberation” is a congregational prayer repeated each week. (As with the theme song, a video resource is available at [www.leaderonline.org](http://www.leaderonline.org) that shows the hand signs for the prayer.)

Different groups of people, including children, can be asked to come up front and lead the signing of the liberation prayer. Each Sunday, following the reading and during the liberation prayer, one of four sections of the chains can be removed from the altarscape to dramatize the ongoing process of God acting to liberate us. Please note that it is also possible to use the readings and prayer for liberation in a more traditional lighting of the Advent candles at the beginning of the service.

### EASY PHOTOCOPYING

You may have noticed *Leader’s* new, wider size. Don’t worry! The worship resources are still contained within an easily photocopyable area (8.5 in. / 21.59 cm wide from the edge of the page to the inner, dashed line).



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**WORSHIP**  
resources →

# Freedom Bound: The Path of Justice

## Texts

Jeremiah 33:14-16; Psalm 25:1-10; 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13; Luke 21:25-36

## Focus Statement

The prophets declare that God's justice is coming through the promised Messiah. A moment of moral and spiritual clarity awaits us in this Advent as we pray for God's Spirit to strengthen our hearts and lead us on pathways of justice. Freed from what keeps us captive, we can live in more caring and just ways.

## Song Suggestions

### THEME SONG

STJ 109 There Is More Love Somewhere

### HYMNAL AND SUPPLEMENTS

HWB 172 O Come, O Come, Immanuel

HWB 178 Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus

HWB 487 Teach Me, O Lord

STJ 2 Hamba Nathi (Come, Walk With Us)

STJ 5 Come and Be Light for Our Eyes

STJ 30 Jesus Christ Is Waiting

STJ 65 Let Justice Flow like Streams

STS 15 Hope Is a Candle

## Gathering

*(Christ candle and first Advent candle are lit as service begins.)*

### 1. Call to Worship

(based on Psalm 25:1-10; Luke 21:25-36)

**Leader:** We live in troubled times, waiting for God's burst of light in our dark world.

**People:** **Lift up your eyes! God's justice is on the way.**

**Leader:** Liberating God, sustain us and help us to walk in your ways.

**People:** **Free us from the chains of prejudice and the shackles of sin.**

**Leader:** This is the moment to wake from sleep.

Be ready, Jesus is coming to set us free.

**All:** *Let us worship God, whose mercy promises us new life through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

### 2. Opening Prayer

God of Advent, in the darkest days and nights of the year, our hearts turn toward your promised light. Help us to not fear the shadows in our own lives; help us to have courage to face what binds us and keeps us from living in freedom in Christ. Lead us in your light to a manger where the face of God—truth, justice, mercy—shines bright and clear. Amen. (Adapted from STS 125.)

## Praising

### 1. Congregational Singing

# Hearing God's Word

## 1. Children's Story

## 2. Offering

## 3. Scripture Reading

## 4. Sermon Starter

"Make me to know your ways O Lord; teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth . . ." (Psalm 25:4-5a). We are also invited on this first Sunday of Advent to take the posture of a learner before God. What is God's freedom based upon? The Scriptures on this first Sunday of Advent invite us to consider that freedom is based on a foundation of justice.

Through Jeremiah we hear that justice is coming through God's promised Messiah. Our reading in Luke advises us to be alert and ready. There will come a day when we will stand before the Son of Man. This is a moment of moral and spiritual clarity for us and for our world.

All of us are caught up in the injustices around us. As Christians we live in freedom through our Christian baptism. Buried with Christ, we arise to new life. Yet we know that our familial and social histories entangle us. We

are bound up and enslaved in harmful relationships. We struggle in our churches to move past theological loyalties that keep us from hearing others' truths.

We may be bound for freedom but there is much we need to let go of. Excess baggage of prejudice, privilege, mistaken assumptions, and tolerated injustice burden us. As we anticipate and celebrate the incarnational mystery of this season, we also ask God's Spirit to awaken in us a discerning heart to what we need to be freed from. This process of change in us prepares us and points us toward an alert compassion for the world we live in. If God begins this work of freedom in us then we can live in more caring and just ways with those around us. We need strength for this journey toward freedom. "And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may remain blameless" (1 Thessalonians 3:13a).

# Responding to God's Word

## 1. Time of Quiet/Musical Interlude

(Song suggestion: "Hope Is a Candle" STS 15)

## 2. Reading and Removing of Chains

1: Together, we light this first candle of Advent in anticipation of God's justice breaking in.

2: **In the midst of our realities and the realities of the world, God longs to free us from all that holds us captive to fear, confusion, even despair.**

1: We light this candle as a reminder to take heart. God is coming to make things right.

2: **The path God reveals is freedom. Freedom from fear.**

**All: Freedom from sin. Freedom from injustice.**

## 3. Prayer for Liberation (unison)

Liberating God, set us free. As we walk this road of freedom, give us more love, more hope, more peace, and more joy. (*Remove first set of chains.*)

## 4. Invitation to Light a Candle

# Sending

## 1. Blessing

Now may God increase our love for one another and for all, and strengthen our hearts in holiness so that we will be blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus.

# Freedom Bound: The Path of Mercy

## Texts

Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 1:68-79; Luke 3:1-6; Philippians 1:3-11

## Focus Statement

In this second week of Advent, images of God's mercy wash over us. The most striking image is of light that enters the darkness—dawning on us, illuminating our darkness, and giving us the strength to make the changes we need to be on this freedom way.

## Song Suggestions

### THEME SONG

STJ 109 There Is More Love Somewhere

### HYMNAL AND SUPPLEMENTS

HWB 151 Marvelous Grace of Our Loving Lord

HWB 174 Bless'd Be the God of Israel

HWB 176 Comfort, Comfort, O My People

HWB 177 Creator of the Stars of Night

HWB 183 On Jordan's Banks, the Baptist's Cry

STJ 54 Longing for Light

STJ 101 La Tenebre (Our Darkness)

STJ 78 Sizohamba Naye (We Will Walk with God)

## Gathering

*(Christ candle and second Advent candle are lit as service begins.)*

### 1. Call to Worship

Leader: We wait for God's light to burst into our dark world.  
Open your eyes. Unstop your ears.

People: **As we prepare for your coming,  
we recognize that we are in need of change.**

Leader: Like the valleys and hills, the crooked paths and rough places,  
we need your mercy to transform us.

People: **We confess that we still live in the shadows of apathy, greed, and prejudice.  
Burn away in your refining fire all that keeps us from you.**

*All: Kindle in us your merciful love, so that we may be freed to serve and worship you in spirit  
and in truth.*

### 2. Opening Prayer

God of faithfulness and truth, you sent your servant John the Baptist to preach in the desert and summon the people to repentance. Make us and all things new, that in the wilderness of our hearts we too may prepare a way over which your Son may walk. Amen. (Adapted from STS 126.)

## Praising

### 1. Congregational Singing

# Hearing God's Word

1. Children's Story
2. Offering
3. Scripture Reading
4. Sermon Starter

"By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us" (Luke 1:78). With his message of God's tenderness, Zechariah softens the tone of Malachi's warnings of a purifying fire. Yet no one is exempt from this cleansing process. To communicate the message of freedom in Christ, we need to be freed ourselves from the chains that bind us. God's action in Advent, like the refiner's fire that burns away impurities, reveals our true selves (Malachi 3:1). Even as we go through the necessary self-examination and repentance, we can trust that

God will bring to completion the good work begun in us (Philippians 1).

Preparation for seeds to grow involves disturbing and agitating the soil, breaking up the places that have become hardened and compacted. Similarly, the prophets stir up our hearts and minds, preparing "a way for the Lord" (Luke 3:1-6). How are we getting ready for God's coming? What needs to be stirred up and brought to light so God's mercy can burst in and break out?

## Responding to God's Word

### 1. Time of Quiet/Musical Interlude

(Song suggestion: "Longing for Light" *STJ* 54)

### 2. Reading and Removing of Chains

- 1: Together we light the second candle of Advent to symbolize our need for God's mercy. God bursts into our world to help us break out of cycles of hatred and revenge.
- 2: **We can come out of the shadows and live in the light.  
With this candle, we offer our hearts and minds to God.**
- 1: We light this candle as a reminder to take heart.  
God is coming to make things right.
- 2: **The path God reveals is mercy. Forgive us, O God.  
We long to be set free from all that keeps us from you.**

### 3. Prayer for Liberation (unison)

Liberating God, set us free. As we walk this road of freedom, give us more love, more hope, more peace, and more joy. (*Remove second set of chains from the front altar.*)

### 4. Invitation to Light a Candle

## Sending

### 1. Blessing

May our love overflow more and more  
with full knowledge and insight to help us determine what is best.  
We are confident of this: the one who began a good work among us  
will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.



# Freedom Bound: The Path of Trust

## Texts

Isaiah 12:1-6; Zephaniah 3:14-20; Luke 3:7-18; Philippians 4:4-7

## Focus Statement

Fear of the unknown, fear of the past, and fear for our security entangles and paralyzes us. On this third Sunday of Advent we bring our fears to God. We long to be released from their power over our lives. Instead of life-denying servitude or a joyless acceptance of fate, our passages counsel God's people to an impassioned, resolute, joyful, and trusting response to life.

## Song Suggestions

### THEME SONG

STJ 109 There Is More Love Somewhere

### HYMNAL AND SUPPLEMENTS

HWB 114 In Thee Is Gladness

HWB 107 Blessed Savior, We Adore Thee

HWB 184 Hark! The Glad Sound

HWB 186 Fling Wide the Door, Unbar the Gate

STJ 105 Don't Be Afraid

STS 39 Will You Come and Follow Me

STS 16 Peace Before Us

## Gathering

*(Christ candle and third Advent candle are lit as service begins.)*

### 1. Call to Worship

Leader: Sing aloud, O people,  
Shout out your worship in a loud voice!

People: **God takes away the judgment against us;  
There's no need to fear disaster.**

Leader: The Lord our God exults over us with gladness;  
Singing loudly as on a day of celebration.

People: **God delivers us from all that oppresses us,  
Changing our shame into praise.**

*All: Rejoice! For God is our strength and our might  
And has become our salvation.*

### 2. Opening Prayer

God of eternity, when the voices of prophets are silent and the faith of your people low; when darkness has obscured the light and indifference has displaced zeal, you see that the time is right, and prepare to send your Son. Set us free from fear and faithlessness that we may be ready to welcome him who comes as Savior and Lord. Amen. (Adapted from STS 127.)

## Praising

### 1. Congregational Singing

## Hearing God's Word

### 1. Children's Story

## 2. Offering

## 3. Scripture Reading

## 4. Sermon Starter

Fear of the unknown, fear of the past, and fear for our security entangles and paralyzes us. On this third Sunday of Advent we bring our fears to God. We long to be released from their power over our lives. Isaiah says, “Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the Lord God is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation” (Isaiah 12:2). There was ample reason to be afraid in our passages today. Israel was a small nation among mighty nations. The Jewish people lived in difficult circumstances with minimal rights and privileges. Every day was an exercise in survival. Instead of life-denying servitude or a joyless acceptance of fate, our passages counsel God’s people to an impassioned, resolute, joyful, and trusting response to life: to trust in the promise that God will take care of enemies and oppressors so that we do not have to avenge the wrongs (Zephaniah 3:18-19), to witness God’s acts of saving grace (Isaiah 12:4),

and to develop prayer filled trust when we are tempted to worry (Philippians 4:6).

This Sunday invites us to pray and act in solidarity with those among us and around us that live in fear. There are limits to what outer freedom we may experience in this world, but we can still work toward inner freedom in whatever circumstances we face. In Advent we journey toward a great trust that God truly holds all things—our broken lives, our violent world, and the divisive churches we are a part of. We confess that we are not yet truly free. We don’t even trust at times that we can be free from what keeps us bound.

Even so, this nonviolent God invites us to participate in restoring the world through trusting, witnessing, praying, and in acting just. Freedom may not be here yet but it is coming.

## Responding to God’s Word

### 1. Time of Quiet/Musical Interlude

(Song suggestion: “Don’t Be Afraid” *STJ* 105 )

### 2. Reading and Removing of Chains

1: Our first candle reminded us of God’s way of justice.

2: **The third candle of Advent encourages us to trust.**

**Just as people of faith have struggled through the ages to trust, so we struggle to trust in God.**

1: Fear of the unknown, fear of the past, fear of our enemies and fear for our security entangles and paralyzes us.

2: **On this Sunday of Advent we bring our fears to God. We long to be freed from their power. With the prophet, Isaiah we pray, “Surely God is my salvation. I will trust and will not be afraid.” (Isaiah 12:2)**

### 3. Prayer for Liberation (unison)

Liberating God, set us free. As we walk this road of freedom, give us more love, more hope, more peace, and more joy. (*Remove third set of chains from the front altar.*)

## Sending

### 1. Blessing

Let us not worry about anything,  
but in everything, with thanksgiving,  
make our requests known to God.

So God’s peace, which is beyond our understanding  
will guard both our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus.

# Freedom Bound: The Path of Love

## Texts

Psalm 80:1-7; Micah 5:2-5a; Luke 1:39-56; Hebrews 10:5-10

## Focus Statement

From the smallest tribe of Israel, from a poor teenager, from the margins God is bringing real and unexpected freedom. The fourth Sunday of Advent explains what God's labor of love will mean for the world. The upheaval that Mary sings about is nothing short of revolutionary.

## Song Suggestions

### THEME SONG

**STJ 109** There Is More Love Somewhere

### HYMNAL AND SUPPLEMENTS

**HWB 173** Savior of the Nations, Come

**HWB 181** My Soul Proclaims with Wonder

**HWB 207** Niño Lindo (Child So Lovely)

**HWB 216** Christ, Whose Glory Fills the Skies

**STJ 31** He Came Down

**STJ 13** My Soul is Filled with Joy

**STS 1** Praise the One Who Breaks the Darkness

### OTHER

Oh Freedom ([www.musicnotes.com/sheetmusic](http://www.musicnotes.com/sheetmusic))

## Gathering

*(Christ candle and fourth Advent candle are lit as service begins.)*

### 1. Call to Worship

**Leader:** Our souls magnify you, our God. Our spirits rejoice in you, our Savior.

**People:** **You have looked with favor on your lowly servants;  
Because of you we are called "blessed."**

**Leader:** You have scattered the proud and brought down the mighty.

**People:** **You have raised up the lowly and filled the hungry.**

**Leader:** You have remembered your mercy, helping those in need and their descendants forever.

**All:** *Praise. Praise God's Holy Name.*

### 2. Opening Prayer

God who labors in Love for the world, like Mary make us bold to question angels. Like Mary, help us pray: your word be done. Like Mary, stir our hearts to ponder what you do. Like Mary, prepare us for the birth of Christ. (Adapted from STS 134.)

## Praising

### 1. Congregational Singing

## Hearing God's Word

### 1. Children's Story

### 2. Offering

### 3. Scripture Reading

#### 4. Sermon Starter

Jesus' birth is near. The fourth Sunday of Advent explains what God's labor of love will mean for the world. The upheaval that Mary sings about is nothing short of revolutionary. It will not be greeted by many as welcome news. It is a song of reversals. The kingdom God comes to inaugurate in Jesus is not what the world, and even we, would expect (Luke 1:52-53). For the preacher on this Sunday, it is helpful to acknowledge that most of us can be counted among the privileged and powerful of the world. We may not have chosen our station in life, and we may be taking steps to be living more simply; nevertheless we are materially comfortable. We are challenged to consider how the power and privilege we have can be used to bring hope and healing to others.

Advent's liberating love comes for all of us. God longs to set us all free: to free the poor among us from

the life-denying effects of scarce food, inadequate homes, poor education, and stingy healthcare; and to free the rich from the desperate need to hold tightly to material possessions and status.

As a contrast to the upheaval of Mary's message, the image of a Good Shepherd in Micah and Psalms communicates that God will be right by our side. God will shepherd each of us along the way to freedom. Jesus is aware of what we need to grow and thrive. Whether suddenly or gradually, Jesus will turn our world upside down.

Who are the poor in the communities we live in? What can we learn from their experiences? This may be a good Sunday to begin a conversation on a new initiative that would embody God's concrete, practical love for those who need it the most in our communities.

## Responding to God's Word

### 1. Time of Quiet/Musical Interlude

(Song suggestion: "Oh Freedom")

### 2. Reading and Removing of Chains

- 1: Freedom is coming. On this fourth Sunday of Advent, we are drawing ever nearer to God's coming in Jesus. We feel the stirring of a new age.
- 2: **As we light this candle, we celebrate the good news, which breaks the powers of oppression and lifts up the lowly.**
- 1: We pray to be freed from the grip of privilege, power, control, and status that imprison us and shelter us from the suffering of others. Help us to stand in solidarity with all who suffer the brunt of history.
- 2: **As we light this candle, we are humbled by Mary's trust and boldness. We pray that like Mary we may be open to birth new hope.**
- 1: To trust in God's upside-down Kingdom.  
Come, Lord Jesus, come. Come to free us.

### 3. Prayer for Liberation (unison)

Liberating God, set us free. As we walk this road of freedom, give us more love, more hope, more peace, and more joy. (*Remove fourth set of chains from the front altar.*)

### 4. Invitation to Light a Candle

## Sending

### 1. Blessing (unison)

With the joy that was Mary's, may our souls magnify the Lord and our bodies be the means through which you continue the mighty work of salvation for which Christ came. Amen. (STS 132)

# Sunday after Christmas

## The Path of Service

DECEMBER 27, 2015

### Texts

Psalms 148; 1 Samuel 1:18-20, 26; Colossians 3:12-17; Luke 2:41-52

### Focus Statement

The gift of Jesus is a gift that shapes the church's life. After Christmas celebrations in which we spend time with our families and friends, it is good to remember on the Sunday after Christmas that our primary family is the church. Freedom in Christ is evidenced by a spirit of cooperation, not competition—through service and bearing with one another despite conflicts and differences.

### Song Suggestions

#### THEME SONG

**STJ 109** There Is More Love Somewhere

#### HYMNAL AND SUPPLEMENTS

**HWB 47** Earth and All Stars

**HWB 48** All Creatures of Our God and King

**HWB 50** Praise the Lord, Sing Hallelujah

**HWB 187** Let the Heavens Be Glad

**HWB 197** Angels We Have Heard on High

**HWB 548** Teach Me Thy Truth

**STS 26** Helpless and Hungry

**STS 28** Holy Child within the Manger

## Gathering

### 1. Call to Worship

**Leader:** Praise the Lord, sing praise all the heights!

**People:** **Praise God, sun and moon. Sing praise, all you shining stars!**

**Leader:** Praise God, all the earth. Sing praise, all fruit trees and hills!

**People:** **Praise God, all you animals. Sing praise, creeping things and flying birds!**

**All:** *Young men and women alike, old and young together,  
Let all that has life and breath praise God!*

### 2. Opening Prayer

Today, O God,

the soles of your feet have touched the earth.

Today, the back street, the forgotten place

have been lit up with significance.

Today, the households of earth welcome the King of heaven.

For you have come among us, you are one of us.

So may our songs rise to surround your throne

as our knees bend to salute your cradle. Amen. (STS 130)

## Praising

### 1. Congregational Singing

## Hearing God's Word

### 1. Children's Story

## 2. Offering

## 3. Scripture Reading

## 4. Sermon Starter

The gospel writers do not spend much time dwelling on Jesus' infant years. The stories of Samuel (1 Samuel 2) and Jesus in the temple (Luke 2) suggest a biblical culture that values insight and wisdom that comes through learning and maturing. Jesus is portrayed as a learner moving into deeper spiritual maturity. Paul's letter to the Colossians similarly counsels grown-up faith. "As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience" (Colossians 3:12). A spirit of cooperation not competition is evidence of freedom in Christ through service and bearing with one another despite conflicts and differences. The focus is not inward gratification, popularity, or even expression of gifts but on service and care for others.

The gift of Jesus is a gift that shapes the church's life. After Christmas celebrations in which we spend time

with our families and friends, it is good to remember on the Sunday after Christmas that our primary family is the church. It is in the body of Christ—as we study God's Word, as we worship together, as we share with one another in song (Colossians 3:16-17)—that we are shaped into God's people in service to the world. It is in the community of faith that we learn to live and practice the freedom that Christ gives us. Just as Mary learned in the story of Jesus in the temple, even the bonds of natural families serve a higher calling.

This Sunday's Scriptures invite us to renew our calling to serve God through the ministries and life of the church. As we continue to celebrate Jesus' birth we also celebrate the church that bears Jesus' name.

## Responding to God's Word

### 1. Time of Quiet/Musical Interlude

(Song suggestion: "He Came Down" *STJ* 31)

### 2. Reading and Removing of Chains

- 1: Together, we light a candle on this Sunday to celebrate the arrival of Jesus in our midst. God comes to us in the utter freedom of vulnerable love.
- 2: **In the cry of a baby entering the world for the first time.**
- 1: We confess, God, that we sometimes prefer a disembodied gospel—one that doesn't get us involved in the world you created.
- 2: **Yet you have come into all of our messiness, troubles, and sin. Oh, how great your love for us!**
- 1: We light this candle to celebrate that Great Love that comes into our world and into our lives. Help us to cherish that love.
- 2: **To bask in that love. To experience forgiveness and new life in that love. May that love ignite in us a flame of love for others.**

### 3. Prayer for Liberation (unison)

Liberating God, set us free. As we walk this road of freedom, give us more love, more hope, more peace, and more joy.

### 4. Invitation to Light a Candle

## Sending

### 1. Blessing

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, let us put on clothes of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. And may Christ's peace rule in our hearts, so that whatever we do, in word or deed, we will do in Christ's name.

## Freedom Bound: The Path of Inclusion

### Texts

Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14; Matthew 2:1-12; Ephesians 3:1-12

### Focus Statement

The light Jesus brings into the world challenges and illuminates all the distinctions between us that we elevate as ultimate goods. For if the light has the power to draw wise men from afar and overcome barriers of former religious outcasts, what power does it still have to bring new freedom into our church and the world?

### Song Suggestions

#### THEME SONG

STJ 109 There Is More Love Somewhere

#### HYMNAL AND SUPPLEMENTS

HWB 66 O Worship the King

HWB 189 To Us a Child of Hope Is Born

HWB 202 The Virgin Mary Had a Baby Boy

HWB 215 What Child is This

STJ 5 Come and Be Light for Our Eyes

STS 30 Arise, Your Light is Come!

STS 31 Jesus, Be the Center

#### OTHER

Shine, Jesus, Shine (words and music by Graham Kendrick; Make Way Music, Ltd., 1997, administered by Integrity Music; available w/ CCLI license)

## Gathering

### 1. Call to Worship

Leader: Arise, shine; your light has come.

People: **God's glory has risen upon us.**

Leader: Even if darkness should cover the earth, deep darkness cover the peoples,

People: **Nations shall come to your light, kings to the brightness of your dawn.**

Leader: Nothing can hide God's glorious light.

All: *Let us look to God and be radiant. Let us reflect the brightness of this dawning.*

### 2. Opening Prayer

O God, the source of all insight, whose coming was revealed to the nations not among men of power but on a woman's lap, give us grace to see you where you may be found. Like the magi of old, we bring our gifts to you. We offer what gifts we have to you in their variety that they may be used in your service. Amen. (Adapted from STS 139, 140.)

## Praising

### 1. Congregational Singing

## Hearing God's Word

### 1. Children's Story

### 2. Offering

### 3. Scripture Reading

#### 4. Sermon Starter

Like a pebble thrown into a pool of water, the effects of Christ's birth and message ripple out. The freedom that Christ brings extends its reach into ever-widening circles through the church's message of inclusive love. The lectionary readings begin with Isaiah's universal pronouncement that there will be a day when "nations shall come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn" (Isaiah 60:3). Then these kingly wise men are given flesh and blood and come to offer Jesus their homage and gifts in Matthew's story. Then in his letter to the Ephesians, Paul confidently asserts that the light that comes on Epiphany Sunday is particularly channeled through the church. For it is "through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known" (Ephesians 3:10).

It is important to remember that Paul's conviction in this passage has come through a mighty struggle, as different groups in the first century fought and judged each other over cultural differences, circumcision, and food and purity laws.

The preacher on this Sunday has an opportunity to explore with the congregation how the light Jesus brings into the world challenges and illuminates all the distinctions between us that we elevate as ultimate goods. Just like in the early church, each of us has essential elements of faith and practice that we consider to be non-negotiable. The standards of faith for one group may differ considerably from another, and that is where the disagreements and acrimony begin. It is hard to live with, talk with, and worship with those we feel have wrong interpretations. Yet God's Spirit calls us to not turn away from each other but to be patient in love (1 Corinthians 13:4), for on this side of heaven each person's understanding of God's truth is incomplete and partial (1 Corinthians 13:12). If the light of Christ has the power to draw wise men from afar and overcome barriers of former religious outcasts, what power does it still have to bring new freedom into our church and the world?

### Responding to God's Word

#### 1. Time of Quiet/Musical Interlude

(Song suggestion: "Shine, Jesus, Shine")

#### 2. Reading and Removing of Chains

- 1: Together, we light the Epiphany candle.  
This light is not just for us. The mystery of God is revealed for all people.
- 2: **We celebrate with this candle the way God's light revealed in Jesus bursts the boundaries, overcomes barriers, and is released into the world.**
- 1: On this Sunday, we celebrate that justice is stronger than wrong, that God will tumble all dividing walls and bring great things from small beginnings.
- 2: **Even as the church celebrates its vocation as the bearer of this message, we humbly accept that the scope and reach of God's love knows no bounds. We confess that like others before us in the church we have tried to narrowly define the limits of God's gracious love.**
- 1: By lighting this candle, we ask God to enlighten our minds and hearts and cast away the shadows of exclusion and discrimination.
- 2: **As we light this final candle of the Advent and Christmas season, we celebrate the many ways that God's light is embodied in the church and in the world in its rich variety.**

#### 3. Prayer for Liberation (unison)

Liberating God, set us free. As we walk this road of freedom, give us more love, more hope, more peace, and more joy.

#### 4. Invitation to Light a Candle

### Sending

#### 1. Blessing

People of God, let your light shine. The light of Christ is in you and among you, guiding you and blessing you, now and always. Amen.