

A Remedy for the Holidays

[Litany of Remembering/Lighting of the Advent Candles]

By Rev John T. Schwiebert, ThM john@metanoiaumc.org

The winter holidays are a difficult time for many who are grieving because of personal loss. It is hard to sing "Joy to the World" when you are experiencing deep pain and unmitigated sorrow. Phrases like "God rest ye merry gentlemen, let nothing you dismay" are sung lustily by friends and strangers who are scarcely aware of how cruel such words must sound to those who are dismayed because of the death of a loved one, or who have just received a disturbing medical diagnosis, or who have recently lost a job or other source of income.

In recent years some churches have begun to sponsor an annual alternative holiday activity designed specifically for people who are grieving, and their close friends and families. It is called a *Service of the Longest Night*, and it is scheduled typically on the evening of the Winter Solstice, December 21, which is, of course, the longest night of the year. Thus are the holidays made a less lonely for people who connect and share with others who are finding that the night of their grief is also long, and dark, and seemingly endless.

The *Service of the Longest Night* is actually quite consistent with the Christian season of Advent, which includes the four Sundays prior to Christmas. Although these weeks of December have been largely taken over by the retail sales industry and made a part of the Christmas season, many Christians still observe Advent as a time to enter into the darkness of longing, hoping, and praying for the restoration of the light and life represented in the birth of the Messiah Jesus. Many churches still practice the tradition of mounting four candles on a horizontally placed "advent wreath" and lighting a new candle each week during the Advent season.

If you are grieving you may want to see if your church is planning a *Service of the Longest Night*. Or you could plan a service yourself, or perhaps a simple fireside gathering in your home, and invite others who are grieving to join you. Below I have included some materials that could be included at such an event, either "as is", or adapted to your specific situation. Or perhaps these materials could be incorporated into your own private meditation during the days leading up to Christmas.

A Liturgy of Remembering and Lighting of the Advent Candles

1. *This first candle we light to remember
those whom we have loved and lost.
We remember their name, their face, their voice,
the memory that binds them to us in this season.
May God's eternal love surround them.*
2. *This second candle we light to redeem the pain of loss;
the loss of relationships,
the loss of jobs,
the loss of health.
We gather up the pain of the past and offer it to God,
asking that from God's hands we receive the gift of peace.
Refresh, restore, renew us O God and lead us into your future.*



3. *This third candle we light to remember ourselves this Advent.*

*We remember these past weeks and months;
the disbelief, the anger, the poignancy of reminiscing,
the hugs and handshakes of family and friends,
all those who stood with us.*

We give thanks for all the support we have known.

Let us remember that dawn defeats darkness.

4. *This fourth candle we light to remember our faith
and the gift of hope which the Christmas Story offers to us.*

*We remember that God who shares our life promises us
a place and time of no more pain and suffering.*

***Let us remember the one who shows the way,
who brings the truth and who bears the light.***

--written by Rev Ben Gosden, Associate pastor of
Mulberry Street United Methodist Church, Macon, Georgia

When We Are Called to Sing Your Praise

This hymn can be sung to the tune of "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear."

- When we are called to sing your praise
with hearts so filled with pain
that we would rather sit and weep
or stand up to complain,
remind us, God, you understand
the burdens that we bear;
you too have walked the shadowed way
and known our deep despair.
- When we are called to sing your praise
And cannot find our voice,
because our losses leave us now
no reason to rejoice,
remind us, God, that you accept
our sad laments in prayer;
you too have walked the shadowed way
and known our deep despair.
- When we are called to sing your praise
and life ahead looks grim,
still give us faith and hope enough
to break forth in a hymn,
a thankful hymn, great God of Love,
that you are everywhere;
you walk the shadowed way with us
and keep us in your care.

--Mary Nelson Keithahn