An Advent Candle Lighting Liturgy

Recognizing Advent traditionally is a penitential season looking to the past in hope of God's future, this Advent candle lighting liturgy is a confessional liturgy. If you already incorporate a prayer of confession in your worship service, this Advent candle liturgy is designed to replace that. If you don't typically include a confession in worship, Advent is a timely season to introduce such a practice to your worshiping community.

This candle lighting liturgy is intended to be flexible. This liturgy will invite you to light the Advent candles at the beginning of worship when other candles are lighted, and then this liturgy will ask you to extinguish each candle and then relight it, as we are Jesus' people after all. Also, this liturgy recognizes the highly contextual nature of our worship and our communities at this moment in time. The is hope each community and worship leader will adapt or personalize the liturgy to their context. Suggestions for adaptation are included. Rubrics are in italic font.

Week 1: Hope (Isaiah 64:1-9, Mark 13:24-37)

Reader 1: This first Advent candle shines brightly in hope, with hope, and for hope. While we long for the world to be better, we hope for change without disruption to our comfort. God promises us a vibrant future and yet calls us to join actively in the work of creating it. Recognizing our hesitancy to become involved, acknowledging our apathy, may we pray:

All: O that you, Holy One, would tear our hearts open and come down,
that you would tear our lives open and expose all that decays our hope.
We see enormous, systemic challenges—institutionalized racism, persistent bias, unequal access to life-giving resources—and we struggle with our response.
We might work toward a more just future, but the energy required to change entrenched hearts, lives, and patterns decays our hope. *(hold quiet for reflection)*
We might dwell in spaces of privilege where discrimination and bias are unseen and the learning needed to have sight decays our hope. *(hold quiet for reflection)*
We might ignore the challenges, preferring to stay in safe spaces of apathy, and yet that very apathy toward injustice decays all creation's hope. *(hold quiet for reflection)*

Worship leaders might wish to add/adapt the prayer at this point, naming forces and factors that decay hope in their communities. A moment of quiet is recommended after each factor is named. At this point, please extinguish the candle for hope.

All: Holy God Almighty, when our hope has burned out and despair sets in, we ask forgiveness for when we lean into cynicism and bitterness. When our hope has yet to be sparked, even more, we ask forgiveness for our apathy and the consequences of our indifference. Wake us up, O God, to your creation-shattering power that shakes mountains, rends the heavens, and demands we respond to your stunning righteousness. Amen.

Reader 2: While recognizing the forces that decay our hope are real and powerful, the God who can rend the heavens is stronger. We are people of this God, and so our hope is never extinguished. As such, we relight the candle of hope, burning steadily and stronger, reminding us that we are Jesus' people and we always have hope.

If your tradition uses a Kyrie or other spoken/sung response, please include one here, either before or after relighting the candle.

Pastor: People of God, at the end of all things we are the work of God's hands. Our Creator is constantly shaping and refining us with just love and holy grace. We are forgiven our despair and indifference and renewed with fierce, divine power. Thanks be to God! Amen.

Week 2: Peace (Isaiah 40:1-11, Mark 1:1-8)

Reader 1: The peace of a burning flame, the hope of heat and brightness, these Advent candles remind us of hope and peace. We long for a peaceful faith, a just world. Especially at this time of year, we wrap ourselves in feel-good fantasies where conflict is easily resolved, and all's well that ends well. If only peacemaking were that easy. Realizing we value surface ahead of substance, comfort more than justice, may we give voice to all that breaks down peace:

All: We confess, Mighty God, we are people hooked on comfort. You cry out, "Comfort!", and we stop listening there. We don't want to admit that what makes us comfortable is painful to others. Our cravings for comfort break down our peace. Holy One, we recognize:

We confuse peace for an absence of conflict *(hold quiet for reflection)*
We value getting along ahead of getting to the heart of a problem *(hold quiet for reflection)*
We silence voices crying from the wilderness to protect the illusion of harmony *(hold quiet for reflection)*

Worship leaders might wish to add/adapt the prayer at this point, naming forces and factors that break down peace in their communities. A moment of quiet is recommended after each factor is named. At this point, please extinguish the candles of hope and peace.

All: God whose word stands forever, when we listen to only comfort and fail to hear the struggle involved in preparing your paths, forgive us. When we confuse niceness with justice, we also ask your pardon. We pray you would move our hearts from their reliance on selfish comfort so that we may bring well-being to far more than ourselves. Spark hope within us, Holy One, and move us from apathy to empathy to building up peace. Amen.

Reader 2: While recognizing the forces that decay hope and break down peace are real and powerful, the God who cries from the wilderness and straightens crooked paths is more powerful. We are people of this God, and so our hope is never extinguished, our peace does not splinter. As such, we relight the candles of hope and peace, burning steadily and stronger, reminding us that we are Jesus' people and we always have hope to work for peace.

If your tradition uses a Kyrie or other spoken/sung response, please include one here, either before or after relighting the candles.

Pastor: Beloved of God, do not fear for the Holy One's voice of forgiveness and justice never falls silent. With a shepherd's care, we are gathered back to our Creator and set once again on paths of righteousness. Our comfort is replaced by the strength grace gives, and we are empowered to forge peace. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Week 3: Joy (Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11, John 1:6-8, 19-28)

Reader 1: Sorting through the wreckage of this year, these candles witness to other realities. They give us hope that peace is possible, that Jesus raises up joy from the ruins. In the wilderness wanderings of generational devastations, though, we find it hard to hold joy. The good news of Christ's arrival wears thin in a world torn by selfishness, hypocrisy, racism, and fear. Realizing we are part of systems that diminish joy, may we pray.

All: Holy God, as your Spirit anointed Jesus, so, too, it anoints us as his followers. Our call is to do the things he did, to bring your joy to the earth. Yet we are enmeshed in systems that break hearts, diminishing others' joy as well as our own. Forgive us, Holy One, when we diminish joy by:
complicitly accepting the oppression others face; *(hold quiet for reflection)*
ignorantly defending systems of mass incarceration; *(hold quiet for reflection)*
fearfully deflecting grief for the sake of putting on a good face; *(hold quiet for reflection)*
extravagantly using earth's resources for our convenience. *(hold quiet for reflection)*

Worship leaders might wish to add/adapt the prayer at this point, naming forces and factors that diminish joy in their communities. A moment of quiet is recommended after each factor is named. At this point, please extinguish the candles of hope, peace, and joy.

All: Faithful God, faithful through the pain of rebuilding, forgive us when we fail to understand our role in wider systems of diminishment. Forgive us when we allow brokenness to arrange the rhythm of our days. By your Spirit's power, we pray that you would anoint us once more to be your agents of joy, bringing your breath into oppressive spaces. Amen.

Reader 2: While recognizing the forces that decay hope, break down peace, and diminish joy are powerful, the God who sows righteousness and sprouts fields of joy in the wastelands is more creative. We are people of this God, and so our hope is never extinguished, our peace does not splinter, and our joy does not burn out. As such, we relight the candles of hope, peace, and joy burning brighter, reminding us that we are Jesus' people and we always have hope to build peace and replenish joy.

If your tradition uses a Kyrie or other spoken/sung response, please include one here, either before or after relighting the candles.

Pastor: Today we hear these words, "For I the LORD love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them." God has established an everlasting covenant with us, a promise to forgive we cannot ruin. The faithfulness of God brings us joy. Thanks be to God! Amen.

Week 4: Love (Luke 1:46-55)

Reader 1: This Sunday the wreath glows brightly, reminding us Christmas is near. With the incarnation, God turned creation upside-down—raising up the lowly, humbling the proud, and filling the empty—so that the Creator's perfect love might be the cadence of living. While our world feels upside-down this Advent, the reversals we feel are not borne of love. Recognizing the shifts in our lives frustrate our attempts to be love and accept love, may we pray:

All: Mighty One, you who overturn broken systems and prideful hearts, with some fear and trembling, we pray you would rearrange the order of our lives, too. Our ways of being fail to embody your Son's greatest command—that we love you and love our neighbors as ourselves. We ask your forgiveness for all that frustrates how we give and receive love:

Forgive us for our fear of vulnerability that holds us back from revealing who you've shaped us to be. *(hold quiet for reflection)*
Forgive us for our complacency that values familiarity over transformation. *(hold quiet for reflection)*
Forgive us for filling the empty spaces in our lives with unhealthy things. *(hold quiet for reflection)*

Worship leaders might wish to add/adapt the prayer at this point, naming forces and factors that frustrate love in their communities. A moment of quiet is recommended after each factor is named. At this point, please extinguish the candles of hope, peace, joy, and love.

All: Scatter the thoughts of our willful hearts, O God. Humble us to glimpse the ways you interrupt the chaos and desolation around us. This Advent we pray to be moved through our apathy to greater empathy, and ultimately, find our rest in your unbroken love. Amen.

Reader 2: While recognizing the forces that decay hope, break down peace, diminish joy, and frustrate love are great, the God who breaks into humanity and overturns the order of things is greater. We are people of this God, and so our hope is never extinguished, our peace does not splinter, our joy does not burn out, and our love is never grows cold. As such, we relight the candles of hope, peace, joy, and love, burning brilliantly, reminding us that we are Jesus' people and we always have hope to build peace and replenish joyful love.

If your tradition uses a Kyrie or other spoken/sung response, please include one here, either before or after relighting the candles.

Pastor: The promise of Christmas is that the Holy One will again enter the chaos and desolation of creation, calling forth new patterns of being. God's mercy is given from generation to generation to us. The energy of God comes to the world again: forgiving, sowing grace, and rearranging all things by the cadence of love. Believe this good news and be attentive to its arrival. Thanks be to God. Amen.