Christmas Eve Candlelight Service
(30-45 minutes, preferably just before or after dinner)

Helpful Elements:
Christmas hymnbook and sing-along recordings
White table covering(s)
Battery-powered candles, one for each person
Instrumental Christmas music
Advent stand or wreath with electric candles
Advent banner
Nativity scene (can be on a separate table)

Welcome: I want to welcome all of you to our worship service this Christmas Eve, a holy night to celebrate the birth of Christ. My name is ____, and I'll be leading us in worship tonight. What a joyous time to celebrate the night before Christmas! Thank you all for coming.

Lighting the Advent Candles: Now we will light our five Advent Candles. This past Sunday was the final Sunday of Advent, and we lit four candles: the **PURPLE** candle of hope, the **PURPLE** candle of peace, the **PINK** candle of joy, and the **PURPLE** candle of love. Tonight, Christmas Eve, we light the **WHITE** Christ candle for light, remembering that Jesus is the light of the world.

Please pray with me as we open our time together.

Opening prayer: Almighty God, we thank you for the birth of the Christ child in Bethlehem, as announced by the angels on this holy night.
May the mystery of the Word made flesh fill our souls with wonder and yearning.
Change our hearts from a busy inn to a quiet chamber for your glory.
May we who are gathered join in song with the angels, share the delight of the shepherds, and adore him with the wise men.

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Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

Hymn: Joy to the World

[Distribute battery-powered candles:] We have candles here to hand out to everyone to remind us of Christ's light that spread through all creation and touched each of us. They're powered with batteries, so they're completely safe and not hot! We'll be lighting these later in the service.

[Play instrumental music while passing out candles]

Hymn: O Come O Come Emmanuel

First reading: Isaiah 9:2, 6-7

2 The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness,
on them has light shone. …
6 For unto us a child is born,
unto us a son is given;
and the government shall be upon his shoulder,
and his name shall be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
7 Of the increase of his government and of peace
there will be no end,
on the throne of David and over his kingdom,
to establish it and to uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time forth and forevermore.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

This is the word of the Lord; thanks be to God.

Hymns:
It Came Upon the Midnight Clear
We Three Kings

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Second reading: John 1:1-5
1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. **2** He was in the beginning with God. **3** All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. **4** In him was life, and the life was the light of the world. **5** The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

This is the word of the Lord; thanks be to God.

Hymns:
The First Noel
Angels We Have Heard on High

Interactive Message: Let's think a bit about light.

- What is it like to be in a dark room?
    - Scary; cold; unsure; anxious; possibly boring
- How does it feel when the light finally goes on?
    - Relief! You can see; you're reassured; things aren't scary anymore
- [*optional:*] What does light do? Why is light important?
    - Enables you to see
    - Lights the way
    - Brings warmth, comfort, and protection
    - Without it, you're blind, walking in shadow
- [*optional:*] Where does light come from? What are some sources of light?
    - Lightbulbs, flashlights, flames, sun, moon
- In the passage we read from John 1, Christ is described as "the light of the world." Let's think back to the very beginning of the Bible, Genesis 1: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. **2** The earth was without form and void, and *darkness* was over the face of the deep. … **3** And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light."
    - God is the one who first brought light to our dark, confused, cold, and unsure world.
    - And Christ comes into the world in the same way. Jesus was there in the beginning and is the light of the world (John 1:1-5).
- And after God made light, what else did God make?
    - People! "God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, after our likeness" (Genesis 1:26).
        - So who carries God's image? All of us!

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- Because we are made in the image of God, every single one of us carries a bit of Christ's light. God's Spirit of light, life, and love lives within you!
- Jesus told his followers to let their light shine (Matthew 5:16). We all have light to share, no matter our situation, health, age, or ability.

At this point I'd like us to turn on our candles.

[Help people to switch on their candles. If possible, dim the lights a bit. After candles are on:]

- Sometimes the world can feel like a dark place, can't it? But the glory of Christmas is that Christ's light has come into the world and into our lives to bring hope, peace, joy, and love.
- How does your candlelight look different when we dim the lights a little?
  - The light shines even brighter.
- In what ways would you like to see more light come into your world and the wider world?

Let's pray silently about these hopes and needs for a moment.

(Silent Prayer) … Lord, in your love and mercy, hear our prayers.

[optional:] Now let us pray the Lord's prayer together:
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, the power, and the glory forever, Amen.

Hymn: O Little Town of Bethlehem

Third Reading: The Christmas Story, Luke 2:1-20
In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered…. **3** And all went to be registered, each to his own town. **4** And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, **5** to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. **6** And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. **7** And Mary gave birth to her

firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

8 And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 And an angel of the Lord appeared to the shepherds, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. 10 And the angel said to the shepherds, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. 11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. 12 And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

14 "Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace among those with whom God is pleased!"

15 When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." 16 And the shepherds went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. 17 And when they saw the baby, they reported what the angel had said to them concerning this child. 18 And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. 19 But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. 20 And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told to them.

This is the word of the Lord; thanks be to God.

Hymn:
Away in a Manger

Optional Reading (feel free to skip for time; go straight to closing words below):
"Christmas Bells" by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Longfellow wrote this well-known poem in 1864, right in the middle of the U.S. Civil War.

I heard the bells on Christmas Day
Their old, familiar carols play,
And wild and sweet
The words repeat
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And thought how, as the day had come,
The belfries of all Christendom
Had rolled along
The unbroken song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!
…
Then from each dark, accursed mouth
The cannon thundered in the South,
And with the sound
The carols drowned
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!
…
And in despair I bowed my head;
"There is no peace on earth," I said;
"For hate is strong,
And mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!"

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
"God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;
The Wrong shall fail,
The Right prevail,
With peace on earth, good-will to men."

Hymn: What Child is This

[closing words]
Let's all hold our candles up high for a moment as we pray to close.

Almighty God, on this most holy night, long ago in the city of Bethlehem, a Savior, who is Christ the Lord, was born. Thank you for sending Jesus to bring life, and that the life of Christ is the light of all people. His light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not and will not overcome it. Amen.

Let's sing Silent Night to close.

Hymns:
Silent Night

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This concludes our service. May the blessing of this holy light be upon you tonight and always. Go in peace. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

(optional) O Holy Night

[put on instrumental Christmas music; collect candles and hymnbooks]

Extra material:

Optional Reading: Christmas Truce of 1914[1]

On December 7, 1914, Pope Benedict XV suggested a temporary cease-fire of World War I for the celebration of Christmas. The warring countries refused to create any official cease-fire, but on Christmas the soldiers in the trenches declared their own unofficial truce.

Starting on Christmas Eve, many German and British troops sang Christmas carols to each other across the lines.

At the first light of dawn on Christmas Day, some German soldiers emerged from their trenches and approached the Allied lines across no-man's-land, calling out "Merry Christmas" in English. At first, the Allied soldiers feared it was a trick, but seeing the Germans unarmed they climbed out of their trenches and shook hands with the German soldiers. The men exchanged presents of cigarettes and plum puddings and sang carols and songs. There is even a documented case of soldiers from opposing sides playing a good-natured game of soccer.

The so-called Christmas Truce of 1914 came only five months after the start of war in Europe and was one of the last examples of chivalry between enemies in warfare. It was never repeated—officers stopped future attempts at holiday ceasefires with threats of disciplinary action—but it served as heartening proof, however brief, that beneath the brutal clash of weapons, God's gift of peace endured.

[1] adapted from History.com

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