**Winter Light Lectionary** for use on Sundays in churches from Advent Sunday to Candlemas

**Introduction** During this season of winter we take a few moments in our worship to reflect on the impact of winter on our lives – relating the changes in light and temperature, mood and activity to the liturgical seasons of Advent, Christmas, Epiphany and Candlemas. There is additional material available if you would like to follow up these reflections during the week in various ways, including images, stories, activities, poetry and music.

**Week 5: Sunday 31st December 2023 – Who is this child?**

Leader: Although the days are still short, we know the Light has come

**All: We rejoice in the light of Christ, shining around the world.**

Leader: The light of Christ will guide our steps in the days ahead

**All: Fill us with your light, Lord Jesus.**

*Reflection:*

* The birth of a child is the dawn of delight and disturbance. For Mary and Joseph … a manger and immediate danger, carrying this new-born child as a refugee family to Egypt. They must have wondered, **“Who is this child?”** Angels and shepherds seem to have declared that this child is the greatest news the world could ever receive. Yet this is such a challenging start to his life for all of them.
* Who is this child? As the hours of light increase slightly, we wonder if this is the True Light, promised of old, the anointed One, coming to offer hope to the world. As we wonder at the circumstances of his coming into the world, we wonder how he will be received and how it will all end.
* As the sun breaks through the clouds of grey on a winter’s morning, this child is breaking into the despair of a world that needs a Saviour. The letter to the Hebrews declares who he is: *He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word.* (*Hebrews 1:3)*
* In this child, the God who said “Let there be light” has entered the world. As we wander in the hills and valleys of the southern Highlands of Scotland, our hearts are heavy with the brooding darkness in the world, including the church, this Christmas…
* … but sunshine reflecting off the snow reminds us that God has come and God is here and that we shall not give up – as God has not given up on us. This child will delight and disturb us on our journey, declaring that indeed, Love has shone down.

*Hymn: Love shone down - chorus*

Oh and love shone down

Over the hills

And over the valleys

Oh and love shone down

Over the world.

*Prayer:*

God of love, with trembling hearts we approach the manger in this Christmas season, wondering who we will find, how we will be received, and we are met with a gaze of pure love. The Creator and Sustainer of the universe has come to live amongst us! We offer our thanks and praise today for the love which shines down on us and on all the world. We know that this love will disturb us and disturb the world, but we pray that you will pour upon us more of your love, more of your light, for we need you today.

Fill us with your light, Lord Jesus,

**Fill us with your light. Amen.**

**Week 6: Sunday 7th January 2024 – Clouds and clarity**

Leader: We know the Light has come, even as we travel under cloud-filled skies.

**All: We rejoice in the light of Christ, shining around the world.**

Leader: The light of Christ will guide our steps in the days ahead

**All: Fill us with your light, Lord Jesus.**

*Reflection:*

* Clouds are a feature of the weather all year round and they are part of our story of winter light. They can be dramatic and beautiful, reflecting the colours of the rising or setting sun, pink and orange, edged with gold or silver. They can speak of the presence of God and the breaking into earth of heaven itself.
* But they can also be grey and relentless, masking the rays of the sun or any hope of a patch of blue sky, perhaps at times we feel frustrated by the clouds which prevent us from seeing the glory of the night sky.

**(Clouds and Clarity)** Our spirits can feel clouded at times as well; we feel unsure of our faith or confused about our next steps, as disciples, as congregations, as church.

* If only we could break through these clouds and gain clarity of vision! The writer to the Hebrews speaks of Jesus as the One who can pierce barriers and give us grounds for hope: “*We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters the inner shrine behind the curtain*” (Hebrews 6:19)
* In these early weeks of a new year, a year which will bring a mixture of joy and pain to us all, we are reminded that despite the clouds the sun is still shining, the stars are still burning, the beauty and wonder of God’s love for us is as strong as ever, and we place our trust in the incarnate Christ despite our questions…

*Hymn: 231 v1:*

The silent stars shine down on us

with bright but sightless eye,

unmindful of our little earth,

of us who live and die.

Are we but grains of stranded sand

beside a cosmic sea

that lie unvalued and unseen

in such immensity?

*Prayer:*

Living God, whose character is the light of love, we need that light as the clouds of grief, fear, worry, despair, guilt and a sense of worthlessness threaten to overwhelm us.  In Jesus you have lived our humanity and experienced the darkest of clouds, pioneering a way through to light and peace.  We put our trust in you as we travel on with your presence as our companion.

Fill us with your light, Lord Jesus,

**Fill us with your light. Amen.**

**Week 7: Sunday 14th January 2024 – Shadows**

Leader: As we travel under cloud-filled skies, the sunlight casts shadows before us

**All: We rejoice in the light of Christ, shining around the world.**

Leader: The light of Christ will guide our steps in the days ahead

**All: Fill us with your light, Lord Jesus.**

*Reflection*:

* The Proclaimers declare “**Shadows** fall on our lives . . .” We have been listening to Schubert’s Winterreise, Winter journey, in which the Traveller leaves the house of his beloved and wanders in increasing despair through the snow and ice. Winter can be grey and harsh and demanding of our resources.
* Days of deep sadness can brood over us, apparently from nowhere, when we feel that we don’t have the energy or the desire to keep going on this demanding winter journey. Religion can feel to be empty of power; the dry lists of do this and don’t do that, should and should not, will not carry us through this winter.
* Hebrews speaks of the old way of the law being a shadow of the reality of Christ’s sacrificial love. *Since the law has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered year after year, make perfect those who approach. (Hebrews 10:1)*
* There is a “winter silence” – even the flowers have stopped speaking, and when the snow comes all noise is deadened – in which we can withdraw for a while and catch what the reality of our faith is: living a full human life, trusting that we are valued, forgiven and loved. The presence of shadows indicates that the Light is shining. The God of grace has come.

*Hymn: 231 v2*

Creator of all stars, you came

to grace our transient race.

In Christ you spoke a Word that broke

the silences of space.

Still through that Word you call our hearts

to know that we are known,

to trust we do not walk through time

unvalued and alone.

*Prayer:*

God of our winter journey, we sense your presence as we pause to worship. Not only in bright and joy-filled days, but also in shadows and sorrow you walk with us, you hold us, you breathe courage into our spirits. We picture for a moment the people we will see or speak to this week… the tasks we have to complete… the hours we may spend on our own… and we sense the shadow of the Almighty God touching these coming days with grace and blessing.

Fill us with your light, Lord Jesus,

**Fill us with your light. Amen.**

**Week 8: Sunday 21st January 2024 – The dark before the dawn**

Leader: The sunlight casts shadows before us, we are growing roots into the depth of your love

**All: We rejoice in the light of Christ, shining around the world.**

Leader: The light of Christ will guide our steps in the days ahead

**All: Fill us with your light, Lord Jesus.**

*Reflection:*

* Although the days are lengthening, there are still some mornings which feel very dark. Especially those early hours of the **darkness before the dawn**, when we wonder if day will ever come. How the winter can seem to drag at times.
* As the shapes of trees emerge against the dark sky, we may feel wonder at their beauty and majesty. The branches stretch out, seeming to beckon the sun to rise and shine down, to warm them, so that buds can open and leaves begin to show green.
* But at the same time, the tree is sending its roots down, down into the darkness of the earth and drawing water and nutrients from the soil. The tree needs the darkness as much as it needs the light if it is to flourish and grow.
* So too for us, the times of winter in our lives – whenever they come – can be times of feeding, healing, nurture and replenishment – we too can draw deeply on the resources of God’s love. Silence and darkness can be the arenas of God’s activity in our lives *(a short pause, with the words “A short silence” on the image).*
* The letter to the Hebrews often recalls the sacrificial systems of the Old Testament, where the High Priest entered once a year into the inner tent, the Holy of Holies, where God was understood to dwell in the Ark of the Covenant, a wooden box, gold on the outside but dark inside. God inhabits darkness. With the coming of Christ, the story changes: *For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands…but he entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. (Hebrews 9:24)*
* In darkness or in light, in doubt or in certainty, we have cause for hope in the light of Christ.

*Hymn: 231 v3*

We see the star the wise men saw

and hope again is stirred.

We track the footprints left in time

by your incarnate Word.

We see them climb a lonely hill

where Love is left to die –

the Love that formed the farthest star

and hears the faintest cry.

*Prayer:*

Living God, as we ponder on the story of our life, there is so much that is beyond our understanding, much that we have buried and try not to bring to mind.  You invite us to connect with you in honesty and humility, to sit with you, the compassionate One, to discover your grace in the deepest darkness and to open our hearts to your transforming love.  Oh, that the world might taste and see!

Fill us with your light, Lord Jesus.

**Fill us with your light. Amen.**

**Week 9: Sunday 28th January 2024 – The day dawns**

Leader: We are growing roots into the depth of your love and we long for the dawning of a new day

**All: We rejoice in the light of Christ, shining around the world.**

Leader: The light of Christ will guide our steps in the days ahead

**All: Fill us with your light, Lord Jesus.**

*Reflection:*

* Perhaps you have gone outside on a clear winter’s night and wondered at the stars. Orion the Hunter; Sirius shining bright to the side; Taurus the Bull; the cluster of Pleiades. How many years has their message of light been travelling on its way to our eyes?
* Perhaps you have been outside before a late breakfast and seen our star, the sun, breaking above the horizon, announcing the beginning of a new day, the light creeping across the land to herald the dawn.
* **(The Day Dawns.)** Jesus came, comes and will come like that breaking dawn. The Light.
* On this winter journey we have travelled through a snowstorm in the mountains; there have been crashing waves and blazing fires. We have heard on the radio of political intrigue, devastating earthquakes, horrendous crimes and environmental disasters. We have wondered about the church in Britain and its future. Winter is tough.
* Hebrews offers us a destination which is hope-full, the promise of a new city, a new world, a new beginning. *You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, but you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering. (Hebrews 12:18,22)*
* We have seen glimpses of the coming of the light on the winter journey; one day the dawn will break in all its glory and winter’s gloom will be dispelled. This is the coming for which we all long. The light shining in Bethlehem is the light of the Healer and Teacher in Galilee, is the light at the empty tomb, is the light guiding us through the storm, is the light whose glory will one day fill the skies.

*Hymn: 231 v4*

O Christ, the bright and morning Star

whose radiance does not fade,

whose glory filled the universe

before the planets played:

come, heal our hearts of blinding doubt

till faith shall end in sight.

Shine down upon our darkened earth

and conquer sin’s long night.

*Prayer:*

God of glory, we sense you in the first light of dawn on a winter morning.

God of glory, we glimpse you in the small, steady flame of a candle on a still, dark, afternoon.

God of glory, you warm us with the smouldering fire of love and compassion on a cold evening.

God of glory, you amaze us with the mystery of stars and planets on a dark night.

Fill us with your light, Lord Jesus,

**Fill us with your light. Amen.**

**Week 10: Sunday 4th February 2024 – Light to the nations**

Leader: We long for the dawning of a new day and look with all God’s people for the triumph of love

**All: We rejoice in the light of Christ, shining around the world.**

Leader: The light of Christ will guide our steps in the days ahead

**All: Fill us with your light, Lord Jesus.**

*Reflection:*

* In this final week of our journey with Winter Light we celebrate the shining out of the light of Christ in the feast of Candlemas. Luke records how Mary and Joseph took Jesus to the Temple in Jerusalem as required by the Law, forty days after his birth.
* There, Simeon and Anna recognise that this tiny child is the longed-for Messiah and they praise God; Simeon describes Jesus as “*a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel*.” The light of Christ is a **light for the nations**.
* Simeon and Anna may be old in years, but they are amongst the first “new people”, recognising and worshipping Christ and praying for his light to shine far and wide. This is not the end of the season of Christmas but the enlarging of it – the good news is for all people of every time and place.
* Let’s hear a little more this week from the Letter to the Hebrews, as the writer rejoices in the connection we share with Simeon and Anna and all those who have gone before and urges us to continue the journey, focused on Jesus…
* *Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. (Hebrews 12:1-2)*

*StF 229 v 3*

Simeon sings now

God offers blessing,

brilliantly gilding

dawn of his day;

light in the darkness,

never extinguished,

light of all nations,

light up our way.

*Prayer:*

Living God, we join with God’s people in every generation to rejoice in the good news of the Light shining out.  We celebrate with a shout of praise.  We utter a whisper of hope.  We live the truth of love.  We pray for the healing of the nations.  We hear the cheers of those who have gone before urging us on and we are strengthened to live this day to your glory.

Fill us with your light, Lord Jesus,

**Fill us with your light. Amen.**