SPECIAL SUNDAY



SERMON STARTER
UMCOR SUNDAY

These worship resources are part of the UMCOR Sunday pastor and leader kit. They may be adapted for your context and integrated into your worship service with the other material in the kit. **These resources are inspired by the lectionary readings for the Annunciation of the Lord (March 25, 2026): Isaiah 7:10-14; Psalm 40:5-10; Hebrews 10:4-10; and Luke 1:26-38.**

INTRODUCTION:
Hope Amid Destruction

In the aftermath of disasters, whether a natural calamity or a humanitarian crisis, we often witness unimaginable destruction: homes washed away, families displaced, communities upended. Yet even in these darkest moments, signs of hope emerge. United Methodists have seen God's light shine through those who answer the call to help. One such beacon of hope is the United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR), our denomination's hands and feet in times of crisis. UMCOR volunteers and partners step into chaos and loss, bringing practical aid and compassionate presence. Following a disaster like 2024's Hurricane Helene in the North Carolina mountains, UMCOR workers moved into affected areas and stayed for weeks and months, building relationships with survivors and offering support beyond what traditional relief agencies could provide. When government services were overwhelmed or inaccessible, the church became a safety net. In one flooded Appalachian community, nine families lost their homes and had to live in campers. UMCOR and local church teams responded with creativity and care, even insulating those temporary trailers with hay bales to keep families warm through the winter chill. As one UMCOR leader in North Carolina noted, local officials were at a standstill until they **"reached out to the church,"** opening the door for families to find safe shelter before the freezing nights set in. These acts of compassionate ingenuity are a testament to God's presence amid crisis. They remind us that when **"God is with us,"** there is hope, even when circumstances seem hopeless.

THE ANNUNCIATION:
God's Promise of Presence

Today's scriptures speak to that very promise of hope and God's presence. In Isaiah 7:14, the prophet delivers a sign to people under threat: *"Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel." Immanuel* means "God with us," a bold assurance that God does not abandon us in our fear or need. Centuries later, in the Gospel of Luke, we see this prophecy beautifully fulfilled. A young woman named Mary, living in the uncertainty of oppressive times, is greeted by the angel Gabriel with world-changing news (Luke 1:26-38). Mary is told she will bear a child who will be *"holy… the Son of God."* Understandably, she is initially troubled and fearful at this greeting. But the angel's message is the same promise: God's favor is with her, and through her, God will *be* with all of us. In that moment, Mary embodies faithful hope. She moves from confusion to trust, ultimately responding, *"Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word"* (Luke 1:38).

Consider the weight of Mary's "*yes*:" She agrees to carry Immanuel into a hurting world. Mary's act of faithful surrender mirrors the very heart of Psalm 40:8, *"I delight to do your will, O my God."* It's not ritual offerings that God desires, but willing hearts ready to do God's will (Psalm 40:6-8; echoed in Hebrews 10:5-10). Mary's willingness allowed the Word to become flesh, God's own self entering our frail human condition to save us. The letter to the Hebrews reminds us that Christ came into the world saying, *"Here I am… I have come to do your will"* (Hebrews 10:7). Jesus Christ is the ultimate fulfillment of *Immanuel*, God-with-us, not from a distance but up close, walking alongside the suffering, healing the sick, feeding the hungry, and finally giving himself on the cross for our redemption.

The Annunciation, therefore, is not just a story of a miraculous birth; it's a story of God's intimate involvement in our world's pain and hope. It's about God choosing to work through human partners, Mary first, and eventually all of us as the body of Christ, to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, and comfort to the brokenhearted. Mary's "yes" set in motion the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, through which God's love and

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mercy became tangible. And Mary's example calls out to each of us: will we also say "Here I am" to God's call to carry hope into the crises around us?

ANSWERING THE CALL TODAY:
UMCOR as God's Hands and Feet

In our modern world, the needs are great and the cries of God's children are loud. But the same God who placed Jesus in Mary's arms now places opportunities for compassion in **our** arms. As followers of Jesus, we are invited to carry forward that incarnational ministry, to be, in a sense, "God with us" for our neighbors in need. UMCOR is a living testimony to this calling. Through UMCOR, The United Methodist Church collectively says "yes" to God's invitation to serve, crossing boundaries and reaching those who might otherwise feel forgotten.

Think again of those mountain communities devastated by Hurricane Helene. While floodwaters destroyed homes and **"storm-torn communities"** were left in despair, UMCOR brought practical hope, helping families move from mere survival to rebuilding their lives. The volunteers' presence said to those families, *"You are not alone, God is with you, and we are with you."* In the same way, UMCOR extends that promise of *Immanuel* in many other crises around the world.

Consider the plight of refugees and migrants, another pressing concern of our time. War, persecution, and poverty have driven countless families to journey in search of safety. Often, they arrive at foreign borders weary, traumatized, and unsure where to turn. Here, too, UMCOR has stepped up as an instrument of God's compassionate presence. Through a partnership with Church World Service and Justice for Our Neighbors (a ministry started by UMCOR), our church helps to provide migrants with food, shelter, legal guidance and hope for a new start. For example, United Methodist congregations in border areas have been delivering meals and supplies to families living in makeshift camps near the U.S.-Mexico border. Imagine parents and children sleeping in tents or on open ground, uncertain of the future, when suddenly they encounter caring strangers offering warm meals, blankets, and assistance. Those acts of kindness are more than charity; they are a proclamation of *Immanuel*. They tell asylum seekers and immigrants, *"God has not forgotten you. We see you, and we will walk with you."* Even when political climates grow cold and policies turn people away, the church, through UMCOR and related ministries, remains undaunted in welcoming the stranger. Each asylum case aided, each child given a meal and a smile, each weary soul offered a listening ear, reflects the love of Christ who was himself a refugee in infancy and who taught us that in welcoming the stranger, we welcome Him.

Beyond our national borders, UMCOR continues to heed God's call wherever suffering strikes. When a massive 7.8 magnitude earthquake rocked Turkey and Syria in early 2023, it left tens of thousands dead and millions more grieving and homeless. In the bitter cold of winter, countless families huddled in tents after their homes were reduced to rubble. But through the support of United Methodists like you, UMCOR partnered with local organizations to bring relief and hope. A community center in one hard-hit city became a hub for distributing tents, blankets, food, and medical care. Perhaps most symbolically, UMCOR provided nearly 4,000 solar-powered lanterns to families living in tent camps so they could have light in the darkness without risking open flames. Those lanterns also allowed survivors to charge phones and reconnect with loved ones, shining light and connection into a situation of fear and isolation. What a powerful image of God's light breaking through! In addition, UMCOR helped fund mental health support for traumatized survivors, acknowledging that rebuilding lives is about healing hearts as much as homes. Through these efforts, the United Methodist family was saying to the earthquake survivors: *"God is with you in your heartbreak, and we will help you carry on."* In every corner of crisis, from flood-ravaged North Carolina, to a migrant camp in Mexico, to the rubble of Syria, UMCOR's presence proclaims that God's love *still* chooses to show up in person, through us.

JOINING THE YES:
Living Immanuel

The Annunciation story teaches us that God's answer to a broken world was not to remain distant, but to enter the story personally.

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God sought out a human partner in Mary, someone who would trust in God's promise and carry His Son into the world. Today, we, too, are invited to be partners with God in a similar way. We, the Church, are called the Body of Christ for precisely this reason: through us, Jesus continues to touch and heal a hurting world. Each time we support UMCOR, through our prayers, our gifts, and our willingness to go or help, we are echoing Mary's *"Here am I."* We're saying "*yes,"* to God's will that the hungry be fed, the homeless sheltered, the displaced welcomed, and the broken made whole.

UMCOR Sunday is more than an annual tradition; it's also a reminder of who we are meant to be all year round. When we give to UMCOR on this special Sunday, we underwrite the ministry that enables all these efforts to happen. As one UMCOR asylum attorney shared, the work of helping vulnerable people is slow and challenging, but our church's support *"helps provide hope and support to those most in need."* When we contribute, we become part of each story of hope, whether it's a family in North Carolina staying warm and safe after a flood, or a refugee family finding legal refuge and welcome, or an earthquake survivor seeing light in the night.

Mary's brave "*yes"* brought Jesus into the world, and Jesus' presence changed everything. Likewise, our *yes* to God's call can bring Christ's presence into the lives of others. In a world often consumed by fear, division, and despair, UMCOR is a shining example of what happens when the church says, *"Let it be with us according to Your word."* It looks like compassion in action. It looks like **Immanuel**, God with us, alive in our midst.

As we reflect on God's faithfulness from Isaiah's prophecy to Mary's calling to Christ's saving work, let us also reflect on our response. God is still looking for willing servants to carry hope into places of despair. This UMCOR Sunday, may we affirm our commitment to *embodying hope.* By God's grace, and through our collective effort, those trapped in the darkness of crisis can experience the light of new hope. When the world asks, "Where is God in all of this?" may our actions and support of UMCOR be part of the answer: *"Right here with us."* Through UMCOR, **"God with us"** is not just a promise of the past; it's a reality being lived out today. And each of us can join in that holy work of love.

IMPACT MOMENT

Use this to guide your message before the offering. This moment prepares us to give with gratitude and purpose. It is our opportunity to remind one another that generosity changes lives and makes Christ's presence known in the world. Introduce it as an Impact Moment, saying: "Before we give today, we pause for an Impact Moment—a time to see how God works through our generosity to bring hope, healing, and love into the world."

Friends, today we've been reminded that God's promise of *Immanuel God-with-us* is not just a word from long ago, but a truth still lived out today. Just as Mary said yes to carrying God's presence into the world, you and I are invited to say "yes" as well.

When we give, we aren't just putting money into a plate. We are putting hope in the hands of families who've lost everything in a flood. We are putting warmth and shelter around children who would otherwise sleep in the cold. We are putting light into dark places—sometimes quite literally—through lanterns, food, and care that carry people through the hardest nights.

That is the power of our giving. Alone, one gift may feel small. But when we join as the body of Christ, our "yes" becomes multiplied. Today, we give to strengthen the ministry of UMCOR. Through UMCOR, our gifts reach across borders and disaster zones, proclaiming to strangers and neighbors alike: *You are not forgotten. God is with you, and we are with you.*

This is why we give—because God gave to us first in Jesus Christ. Because Christ's presence changed everything. And because we believe that presence is still meant to be felt today, through us.

So as we prepare to receive today's offering, I invite you to make your gift with Mary's words in your heart: *"Here am I, the servant of the Lord."* May our gifts today be a "yes" to God's call, a "yes" to hope, and a "yes" to love made real in the lives of those who need it most —uniting us in impact as part of God's work in the world.

By Rev. Nathan Arledge,
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United in Impact: Our Generosity Fuels Hope, Relief and Ongoing Recovery for Communities in Need