



Week 1 Preaching Resources: Deck the Halls with Hope

Scripture Passage: Isaiah 9:2-7

Focus Statement: In times when we feel uncertain, God provides an answer.

ME: Have you ever been in a situation where you couldn't figure out the answer? A test where you didn't know the answer? A situation where you could not figure out a solution? And the options you came up with were not the best solutions or answer.

WE: We've all found ourselves in a place where we didn't have the answer or solution. We've made the wrong choices that didn't result in what we were looking for or expected. Name a few situations where we might feel stuck or uncertain (e.g., times when we thought a gift could diffuse a conflict or doing favors could buy love from someone, parents/spouses giving "guilt gifts" or to smooth over the relationship with a child/spouse).

GOD:

1. This text finds the Israelites in some of the worst of times as threats come from the Assyrian empire with more trouble lying ahead. But God has a plan. While human kings and leaders come and go, with nothing done to alleviate the oppression and pain experienced by the people, God promises a king who will set things right, shine light in the darkness, bring peace and end oppression.
2. The characteristics of this coming king: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. How do you see these characteristics played out in the life and teachings of Jesus?
3. This child has been born to us, a Son given to us; Jesus is the answer to the oppression, darkness and violence in our world. Throughout all that we have experienced individually, as a church and in recent times, the Savior comes to us as a much-needed gift; a timeless gift that is yet proven timely throughout the ages.

YOU: Our world continues to search for light, for answers and for hope. How does Jesus serve as an answer or as hope as we face these realities today? When it appears, the answer cannot be found, we can have hope in knowing that God has a plan and has sent us hope in a messiah who is radiating light into our darkness.

WE: In a world full of conundrums, we can share with the world that we have the answer: Jesus Christ. How do we help someone in our lives, in our circles find comfort and hope in times where it appears there is no solution, answer or clear next step?

We may not always know what is going on, but we can trust in God who has a plan.



Week 2 Preaching Resources: Deck the Halls with Peace

Scripture Passage: Isaiah 26:7-13

Focus Statement: In an uneven season of stress and distractions, God offers us the road map to peace.

ME: As we each travel on our own journeys in life, we often face obstacles. These obstacles come in many forms. Some of doubt, worry, or fear. Others are physical or financial obstacles, issues to resolve, people or just things we have to deal with along the way; just like a runner might have to jump hurdles as they are running a race. Describe a time when you had to clear a path or smooth something out to accomplish a goal.

WE: There are times when we need to carve out a path to accomplish a goal. Like in baking bread, we want to remove lumps in our dough, so we smooth it out with a roller. If we don't smooth it out, we can't control what will happen when placed in the oven. Pockets of "flour balls" can develop. Or like in golf: debris needs to be cleared to make space for your ball or you can't control where your ball may go. In life, there are obstacles and rough places that are beyond our control. What are the "mountains" or obstacles that get in your way and disrupt your sense of peace?

GOD:

1. God prepares a way for us that leads to peace: smooth, straight, level, mountains brought down, valleys raised up. Share how God prepares a path to peace for us. Obstacles and difficulties are not ignored, but God deals with them justly (verse 8, "the path of your judgments"), and so a smooth path is created for those who seek God and God's ways.
2. Verse 8 talks about the Lord's "renown." Through remembering how God has led the people in the past (e.g., out of Egypt, through the wilderness), they can find peace knowing God will continue to lead them now. The same is true for us. Think of difficult circumstances in the past and how God has made a way through them.
3. Sometimes it is hard to see the way of peace God has prepared for us. When people or circumstances seem to be against us, it is hard to believe that peace will come. Verses 10 and 11 express the people of Judah's anger that their enemies seem to be prospering. But they know that because God loves them, has provided for them and is righteous, God will bring peace (verse 12). The Israelites practiced a posture of actively waiting for and seeking the Lord (verses 8-9). In Advent especially, we are called to do the same, focusing our eyes on Jesus, who was sent to give us peace and be an example for us to be peacemakers in the world.

YOU: Seek peace from God, trusting that God will be with us and guide us. What are our obstacles, rough places and how can we let God come in and offer us peace? In this frantic time of Christmas preparation, what steps can we take to find peace by focusing on Christ: prayer/devotion, Sabbath time, active listening.

WE: In a time where we wait with expectation for the Prince of Peace, yet frantically run around stressed with holiday planning and holiday activities, we cannot allow the obstacles and frustration we encounter in this season to let us forget God's peace. We must stay focused on Jesus who is the giver of peace.



Week 3 Preaching Resources: Deck the Halls with Joy

Scripture Passage: Luke 1:39-55

Focus Statement: God provides joy in unexpected ways through unexpected means, people and places.

ME: How many times have you done something that you started out not wanting to do, but ended up enjoying? Share a time when you experienced this joy, perhaps a time when you received a gift from a person surprisingly, and it made a big impact on you and brought you joy.

WE: We all have an opportunity to experience unexpected joy in our life. Sometimes God has a way of turning things into unexpected joy through people in our lives like Elizabeth does for Mary. Elizabeth helps Mary find joy in her challenging situation. Mary's struggle changes to joy with Elizabeth's blessing and welcome.

GOD:

1. Mary goes to visit her cousin, Elizabeth. Even though Elizabeth's pregnancy was a miracle because of her age and history of being unable to bear children, Elizabeth's miracle baby leaped inside her when Mary arrived. This was a witness to being in the presence of an even greater miracle, an indicator that Mary's baby was the Lord of all. This brought Elizabeth joy, and Elizabeth's joy transformed Mary's perspective. It was a transformational moment for Mary to move from her anxiety to celebration and praising God.
2. Mary, hearing Elizabeth's praise, joins in to rejoice and declares her praise in song. Joy was revealed in Mary's song that God was fulfilling God's promise to Abraham and his descendants to care for the lowly, humble and hungry through people. Mary's faith, understanding of the scripture and devotion to God are poured out in this moment of rejoicing.
3. Mary sings of God's goodness, God's greatness, God's faithfulness and God's power. The joy we experience from God cannot be kept to ourselves. Mary could not help singing a song of God's mercy and grace to the world. As we have received and are receiving that same mercy and grace, we too can connect to the source of Mary's joy and experience it for ourselves. Even in the midst of uncertainty and anxiety, the troubled times of her society and government, Mary found just cause to give God joyful praise; and we ought to be able to do the same. For our mighty God continues to do great things for us!

YOU: In what way, can you look for joy in unexpected places in your life? Where can you look for a different, more joyful perspective on your current situation in life? And how can you express the joy you experience from God during this Advent season like Mary? Through singing a song? Writing a prayer? Reaching out to community?

WE: How could your church share this unexpected joy with the community? Like Elizabeth did, how could your church bless and welcome unexpected guests at your church services during this Christmas season? Are we ready to share joy and blessings with the world like Mary did?



Week 4 Preaching Resources: Deck the Halls with Love

Scripture Passage: Matthew 1:18-25

Focus Statement: God is with us always and gives us the greatest gift of love, the choice to accept it and the call to share it.

ME: Imagine a moment of your life when you were taking a risk, perhaps sharing your feelings with others, or stepping up to help someone else. Maybe you were making a big decision for an unknown future regarding a new job, moving, or school.

WE: We have probably all been there, in the position to make a decision for others and for the future. But when we make a decision, we need to consider whether our decision might affect our loved ones and other people in our lives. On the night an angel appeared to Joseph, he was also struggling to make the “right decision” for Mary and himself. Just like one of us. Sometimes love requires us to make difficult decisions, to go to new places, and to hope that we are doing the right thing.

GOD:

1. When Joseph was afraid to marry Mary and live with her, God’s angel appeared to him and gave him courage to be Jesus’ earthly father. God’s love for us gives us the strength and courage to do the things we have to do. God was there for Joseph when he was struggling that night and gave him the name for his new child, “Emmanuel,” meaning “God is with us.” Indeed, God is with us in any and every situation and gives us courage to step up to choose love, even when love is not the easiest choice (perhaps for social reasons, like in Joseph and Mary’s case, or for personal or other reasons).
2. True love requires active presence and courage. God is with us when we have a fear of the unknown and an uncertain future.
3. We should also note the amazing courage of Mary, whose life and the life of the very child she was carrying was at stake. Her honor, her reputation, everything was on the line. But she was devoted to God and believed the Word of the Lord that had come to her from the angel. And they called his name Jesus which meant, “The Salvation of Yahweh (God).” What a powerful everlasting gift of love, that the Son of God would be given for our salvation.

YOU: Remember God loves you enough to help in your time of need. God loves you enough to give you the courage and strength that you need. And God loves you so much that God would make such a great sacrifice in giving this gift of love to save you and me. God helped Joseph find the courage to make the hard decision to be the father to Jesus. God loves us so much that God gives us all we need even when it comes at such a great cost. How is God trying to help you in your life today? Will you accept God’s love? And how will you share that love with others?

WE: In what ways, does and can your church reach out to the community in love by taking holy risk? How can we continue to choose love with the courage that God gives us during this Christmas season?



Christmas Eve: Deck the Halls for Christ

Scripture Passage: Luke 2:1-20

Focus Statement: We come this day to celebrate the birth of Christ, the Savior of the world. **Reflections from John Wesley:** *Glory be to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased. - Luke 2:14 NLT* This rejoicing acclamation strongly represents the piety (holy devotion) and benevolence of these heavenly spirits: as if they had said, Glory be to God in the highest heavens: let all the angelic legions resound [God's] praises. For with the Redeemer's birth, peace and all kind of happiness, come down to dwell on earth: yea, the overflowing of Divine good will and favor are now exercised toward [humanity].

ME: Share a story about a time when you were planning for a party where everything had to be perfect, and yet there was an unexpected event. How did you see God at work in this unexpected event (or, can you see God at work in this unexpected event in retrospect)?

WE: I am sure each one of us has found ourselves planning a perfect event only to be interrupted by the late arrival of a food delivery or the gift you wanted to buy was not available. Our plans for perfection do not always match up exactly with how God is going to work. For most of us, there have probably been many times this year [2020] when we have had to celebrate special times in ways we never imagined. Many times our plans are forced to change. Today's scripture shows us that our plans are not always God's plans.

GOD: In this Christmas Eve passage, God is:

1. Highlighting the simplicity in which Christ was born, with a focus on the manger, shepherds and Mary. Through the simplicity of Christ's birth, God's glory reigns. As we reflect on the simplicities and humble surroundings of Christ's birth, let us take time to appreciate the simple things that bring us joy and the simple ways in which we can show love to one another.
2. God invites all people, the lowly people and the ordinary people, to celebrate with God. And God is inviting all of us today to celebrate. All are invited to "Deck the Halls" and celebrate! This time of year is a time in which many of us relish family traditions and rituals, but this is also a time to open ourselves to others, to invite, welcome and share.
3. God's is fulfilling God's promise, spoken about from the Old Testament, with a Savior being born. Aside from whatever gifts we may or may not get, lists completed, cookies baked, and stockings stuffed; we have even greater gifts to celebrate. One of those gifts is God being a promise keeper. The God of our salvation is a promise keeper, and a loving, saving, and gracious God. That is a gift we get to cherish each and every day.

YOU: Today is a celebration of the Lord's fulfilled promise in Jesus Christ. God invites you tonight to see God at work in the ordinary and to remember that God's promise is for all people—that includes each one of us.

WE: Imagine if this congregation brought the "good news of great joy" not only to each other and our families, but to the world. Who do you know that needs to hear the good news? How could this good news shape our communities?



Sunday after Christmas: Deck the Halls with a Promise Fulfilled

Scripture Passage: Luke 2:22-40

Focus Statement: As we celebrate the promise of God, fulfilled in Jesus, we hold onto God's promises for our lives too.

ME: Recall a time when a promise was fulfilled. This could be a promise you made to yourself or to God, having to do with the holiday season, completing college, buying a home, avoiding debt or getting healthier. Or it could be a time when someone made you a promise, maybe a parent or friend, and you were relying on that promise and knew that things might not be okay if they didn't keep their word...but they came through and kept their promise.

WE: While we can all more than likely recall times when promises were broken, there are also many times when they are fulfilled; we often don't give the fact that promises were kept the same energy as we do to broken promises. We have much to be thankful for. Use some congregational examples, i.e., times when God saw the congregation through tough times or helped them bounce back from tragedy or disaster, or times when God performed miracles in the lives of people in the congregation. Christmas is full of promises that are fulfilled, with the most important promise that God gave us fulfilled in coming to us as the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

GOD:

1. God fulfills God's promises. Simeon had lived an upright and holy life and was devoted to God. He longed to see the salvation and consolation of his people. The text says he was filled with the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit of God had promised him that he would not die before he saw the Messiah. Can you imagine the joy that overflowed from Simeon as he literally held this long-awaited promise in his arms? God had promised to bring salvation to the people, and that promise was fulfilled.
2. God has a purpose for Jesus' life. Simeon recognized that this infant, Jesus, would have a purpose and that he would bring the salvation of God's people, but this purpose is not achieved without pain. Simeon reminds us in this moment that in living out our purpose and holy call in life, there is a burden. God gives us this gift, and reminds us that it does not mean that our days will be easy and always painless. This life with Christ comes as what often feels like both a privilege and a burden. Yet, through the life of Jesus Christ, God has accomplished salvation for all and given each of us a place and purpose that follows this.
3. God has a plan. Anna speaks of Christ to those who were looking for redemption showing that she had not lost hope. She believed that God had not only a purpose for Christ's life but a divine plan for how Jesus would save us, and she gives thanks to God for this holy plan.

YOU: God has a promise, a purpose and a plan for your life...for all our lives. And God asks that you will trust God to keep God's promise to save you, to always be with you and to help guide you through this journey called life. God has a purpose for you. You may not understand it, and you may be trying to figure out what it is. Sometimes it takes others around us to help us see it, but God has a divine purpose for your life. And with that purpose, God has a plan for us. Oftentimes, we lose hope, finding it hard to rejoice and to take solace in our faith in God. But God has plans, thoughts and ways that are higher than ours.



WE: One of the greatest benefits of this life in Christ is that we are not alone.

There is such a blessing in having faith in community with others. We are called to remind one another of the promises of God and the eternal hope in Christ.

We are called to share that hope, that joy, that faith with the world. And God is calling us to help one another see that God has a purpose and a plan for each of our lives.

As we face the dawning of a new year and reflect on this year that has passed, it may be hard to see that.

But how can we help one another hear God's voice?

To remind someone of the hope we have in God?

How can we help someone see that God has a purpose and a plan for their life and that God promises to always be with them?