



Week 1 Preaching Resources: God with Zechariah the Skeptic

Scripture Passage:

Luke 1:5-25, 57-80

Focus Statement:

There are moments when circumstances in life or deferred hopes and dreams may feel like a heavy weight that we carry around with no relief in sight – from the uncertainty of tomorrow to deeper concerns. While all of us face the mystery of what the future may bring, we can be assured that when we pray, God is with us.

ME:

Tell of a story where your prayers for something went unanswered. How long did you pray for it? When did you stop praying for it?

WE:

Unanswered prayers are a common struggle for believers. They can lead to skepticism, doubt, despair, and even hopelessness. Speak into that struggle and connect it to Zechariah's unanswered prayers. How has the church prayed collectively for answers? Where might the church be feeling doubtful and skeptical about God's care?

GOD:

The passage shows three different reasons Zechariah may have begun to lose hope and become skeptical that God would answer his prayers. Then in one day, all three prayers are answered.

1) Zechariah was a priest. Once a year his division of priests would take their turn serving in the temple. Each day they would draw lots. If you were chosen, you were given the privilege to enter into a holy place and offer prayers for the people. This was such a sacred privilege, you were only allowed to do it once in your lifetime, and many priests never got to do this at all. By this time at his older age, Zechariah may have despaired of ever being chosen for this sacred duty. Then one day, he was chosen!

2) Zechariah and Elizabeth prayed fervently for many years that God would bless them with a child. Imagine how they must have felt seeing family and friends being "blessed" while their prayers seemed to go unanswered. They maybe lost hope and stopped believing God would provide. It must have been a shock to receive the news of the blessing of a child when both he and Elizabeth were beyond an age where they thought it possible or likely.



3) For generations, the prophets of Israel foretold the coming of a Messiah. There was an expectation for the Messianic hope that would bring peace and restoration for the people of God. As a priest, Zechariah was knowledgeable about these prophecies in Scripture. How extraordinary that prayers for the Messiah were now being realized before his eyes. Even more, God was using *him* and his family in God's plan for the world; his child would prepare the way of the Lord!

Zechariah had good reason to be skeptical, but it led to him doubting when and how God would provide, when God *did* visit him with a message (see verse 18). This doubt led him to be speechless for a period of time. Yet, even still, God was with Zechariah, working on him to restore his hope and the hope of the world. God was working in unexpected ways and on an unexpected timeline that Zechariah could have never imagined. Yes, even when Zechariah was skeptical.

YOU:

Where has the church seen hope within the congregation or in the community? Share a story where God answered your long-unanswered prayer but in a way you did not expect. Unpack how when we pray, God is always listening. When God is with us, God answers prayers in a way that not only changes our situation but also changes us.

WE:

Cast a vision for the possibilities of a church community that prays not only for change but to be changed. What are some ways in which God is calling your congregation into hopeful and prayerful change? When we pray, God is with us. And when God is with us, everything changes.



Week 2 Preaching Resources: God with Joseph the Dutiful

Scripture Passage:

Matthew 1:18-25

Focus Statement:

The Christmas story, the birth of the Messiah begins with a dilemma. Mary's pregnancy while she is engaged to Joseph creates a real issue for Joseph, including a potential public scandal. Joseph makes a respectable, dutiful plan but the Spirit of God moves Joseph from dutifulness to participation in God's extraordinary plan.

ME:

Tell a story about a time when you felt like you were doing what was expected of you (your "duty") rather than what was in your heart.

WE:

We all do certain things out of a sense of duty and obligation, but sometimes it can leave us feeling unfulfilled, bored, or like we are a side character in the drama of life and not center stage. The story of Joseph shows us that we all matter in God's story, and it also shows us how to move from living out of obligation to truly listening to God's will for us.

GOD:

Joseph is not the main character of the Christmas story; nevertheless, his decisions and actions have a significant impact on the way it unfolds, on bringing Jesus into the world. Consider how Mary's pregnancy would have impacted both Joseph and Mary. Joseph knew he was not the father of Mary's baby. This is more than a matter of divorce, the law demands she be stoned for adultery, because engagement carried the weight of marriage in those days.

When we are under pressure, who we really are comes out, and this was true for Joseph. Joseph was a righteous man; his choices were driven by his great love and commitment to Mary's well-being, and also by his own inner conviction about how he wanted to behave in the situation. Joseph had planned to dismiss her quietly to avoid public disgrace, rather than claiming his right as an injured husband. Joseph had a decent plan, but it only dealt with the obvious problem. It didn't deal with the deeper concern - Mary's claim that she was pregnant by the Spirit of God.

In the midst of this difficult and painful situation, God is with Joseph in an incredible way; God sends an angel to tell Joseph the truth about his situation, to calm his inner turmoil and give him the wisdom to know what to do. When Joseph awoke, he had a clear choice – stick to his own good, but very human plan or trust God and follow the bold and in a real sense risky plan that God had shown him.



Joseph says 'yes' to playing his part in God's story regardless of the personal consequences. And we should not underestimate those consequences – whether people thought that Joseph had broken the vow of celibacy or that Mary had been unfaithful to him, the potential shame on him was substantial.

The Christmas story is filled with hard choices and sacrifices. Knowing the will of God is not enough; doing it is what matters.

YOU:

Joseph moved from a place of compassion and duty to actually listening to God. What does it look like for Christians to be dreamers, to go beyond what the world expects of them and step into God's bold future? Has God already placed a dream in your heart? What will be your next faithful step? Perhaps, like Joseph, it includes letting go of our desires to explain ourselves, to be understood and validated according to the world's standards, to be seen in the proper light, and to maintain personal comfort and security.

WE:

Have there been times when your congregation or the church more broadly did what was expected or considered the "right" thing, maybe even more than was required, yet missed the opportunity to take a brave step to do a God-inspired thing? Describe or imagine how you, as a church, might take the risk that God is calling you to and live out the dreams God has placed in your heart. In what ways will your church need to be obedient, even if it is uncomfortable?



Week 3 Preaching Resources: God with Mary the Faithful

Scripture Passage:

Luke 1:26-38

Focus Statement:

God calls us into unknown places that we could never foresee for ourselves. And even in the midst of uncertainty, God is with us.

ME:

Tell about a time when you felt called to do something but were afraid to say yes and take the first step. It could be a new job, going to school, starting or ending a relationship, starting a big project, moving to a new place, etc. How did you manage to take that first step? Did you ask lots of questions first? What role did faith (in God, in the future, in the people around you) play?

WE:

We all experience shifts or transitions in our lives when we have to say yes and start something new without knowing what the future holds. We all need faith in something or someone, or we would never be able to take the first step. Mary's faithful "yes" changed the world for all of us and offers a bold example for us to follow.

GOD:

Describe the shock Mary must have experienced when the angel, Gabriel showed up out of nowhere and called Mary "favored one." The passage says Mary is perplexed and pondered what the angel meant by this greeting. Often, when God is calling us into something new, it can be confusing and surprising, just as it was for Mary – something we never expected.

Mary must have become even more surprised and confused when Gabriel delivered his message that she would have a baby, to be named Jesus, who would be God's son and heir to the kingdom of David. Logically, the message didn't make sense because Mary was a virgin, a question she asks to the angel. We often focus on what an honor it must have been for Mary to bring Jesus into the world, but at this early stage, it must have also been extremely scary. Being pregnant and unwed in Mary's time was unacceptable. What would Joseph say? He legally could have her stoned for adultery. God was asking Mary to do something terrifying here.



Mary grapples with what she is being told in her back-and-forth conversation with Gabriel. Gabriel shares that God is also working in unexpected ways in the life of Mary's cousin, Elizabeth. Elizabeth, too, who is beyond the age of childbearing, is pregnant. Gabriel provides this as an example that, "Nothing is impossible with God." When God calls us to do something new and potentially scary, we too can talk to God through prayer. We can also find support from other followers of Jesus who have faced the unknown with faith. And we can be examples to those who are facing scary situations.

In the end, Mary says, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word," (verse 37a). There comes a time when we must choose between fear and faith. Will we allow our fear to prevent us from moving forward into the new thing God is calling us to or will we, like Mary, take the next step in faith knowing that *God is with us* and that with God, nothing is impossible?

YOU:

Give some examples of ways God might be calling individuals in your congregation to take a "leap of faith" into the unknown or a new phase of life. What questions do they have for God? Have they brought those questions to God in prayer, and how can the congregation be praying for them as they think about next steps? Encourage them to talk to others who have been through something similar or to seek support from fellow Christians in their community. What does faith look like for each person right now?

WE:

So often, congregations and the church more broadly allow fear of the unknown to prevent us from taking bold steps forward in faith that "nothing will be impossible with God." What is God calling your congregation to do in faith in this time? What hard questions do you need to bring to God in prayer and when is it time to put the fear aside and say, "Here are we, the servants of the Lord." What would that look like in your context right now?



Week 4 Preaching Resources: God with the Shepherds and the Dismissed

Scripture Passage:

Luke 2:8-20

Focus Statement:

The seasons of Advent and Christmas show us that God takes side characters and transforms them into main characters. The shepherds who were often dismissed play a prominent role in proclaiming the message of Emmanuel, God with us.

ME:

Share a story about when someone has been moved from the sidelines to front and center of the story.

WE:

We have all seen those stories about when an undiscovered athlete wins a competition or the game for their team, or when the small-town singer makes it big. Share some ways that people can unexpectedly get an opportunity to be a part of something special.

GOD:

The Christmas story moves the shepherds from the outskirts to the center of the story. Shepherds in ancient Palestine had a bad reputation. They were rough men and sometimes thieves. They were not your temple-going kind of guys. Because they lived outside with the sheep, they likely wouldn't even be able to go to the temple as they would have been considered "unclean." Yet, the shepherds did essential work as sheep were important sources of milk, meat, and wool and also an essential part of Jewish worship at the temple in Jerusalem.

Despite their lowliness, God chooses to send the message of the birth of the king of heaven on earth to and through the shepherds and not to elite religious or political rulers. No one is too lowly, too insignificant, too powerless, too forgotten, or too anything for God to love or for God to include in doing the important work of sharing God's message. The shepherds only receive a small glimpse of what Jesus will bring. They didn't know about his teaching, miracles, or the death and resurrection. But they responded when God called them to go share the news of the baby's birth. This was a first step into deeper relationship with God and those they would share the message with, like Mary who "treasured" their words and pondered them.

The shepherds, filled with hope from their encounter with Jesus, went back into the dark night, rejoicing and praising God. They returned to the place they had started. That special night did not end their experience of darkness or take away their troubles. It was all still there, waiting for them the next night. But the shepherds had received an invitation to seek out Jesus and encounter him. This encounter changed them, and in turn changed those with whom they shared this news who in turn stepped out to find Jesus for themselves.



YOU:

We, like the shepherds, are offered the same message that God is near. How are we taking part in sharing the good news of Christmas? Maybe you think you are too old, or young or shy or not religious enough, but God invites you to seek out Jesus and share him with others too. Offer some different ways people can share God's love in Jesus through words and actions. Consider also how God might be working through those you have dismissed to show you something about who God is and where God is with you.

WE:

As a church, you can learn something valuable from the shepherds' experience. What would it look like if everyone said yes to God's invitation to share the good news, without worrying about whether they are (powerful, smart, important, etc.) enough? How can and is your church listening to and empowering the dismissed among you and in your community?



Christmas Eve Day Preaching Resources: God with Us

Scripture Passage: Luke 2:1-20

Focus Statement:

There is a big difference between God for us and God *with* us. The birth story is a perfect example of that. A bunch of shepherds and a couple poor kids gather at a barn in some backwater Roman province. Yes, God was with us there and any other "last place on earth" you might find yourself. God is with us there, too.

ME:

Tell a story about an otherwise unremarkable situation or circumstance in which you felt God's presence as you were going about your "ordinary life." (So, this is not the time to talk about a "mountaintop" experience, a dramatic call story, etc.)

WE:

Describe some of the big, flashy ways people sometimes expect God to show up or wish God would show up. You may want to use some examples from how movies, shows or literature portray God (e.g., booming voice from the sky, miracles, God stopping something from happening or making something happen against the laws of nature, signs, clear answers to questions, etc.). Or describe how people often think things have to be a certain way for God to show up (e.g., calm, quiet place, in church, once I've started reading the Bible every day). Yet, Jesus' birth shows us that God *with* us means God has chosen to enter our messy, busy, imperfect humanity as one of us (this is the incarnation).

GOD:

1. The way the writer of Luke tells Jesus' birth story is special. The writer describes what is going on in the world at the time, not just what is going on religiously but what is going on socially/politically. Augustus calls for a census. People are traveling to take care of these civic responsibilities. The world does not stop. There is no fanfare for God's arrival. It is while world affairs keep going that God enters the world in the infant Jesus. In the first chapter of Luke, the story alternates between preparing for John the Baptist's birth and Jesus' birth. While it's clear Jesus is the Messiah and John is not, this back and forth emphasizes how Jesus' story happens alongside and within the story of regular human beings. Further, alternating the John/Jesus stories situates Jesus as the fulfilment of the Jewish hope for a Messiah – God does not bypass the religious faith of the people of Israel but enters into it, albeit in a way that they would not have imagined.



2. While Jesus enters into the social, political, and religious world of the Ancient Near East “as it is,” the incarnation (enfleshment of God) does mark the beginning of a new way of God relating to humanity. In verse 10, the angel tells the shepherds that the newborn child is “the Messiah, the Lord.” This word, “Lord,” is the same one used to refer to God (YHWH) in the Greek translation of the Jewish Scriptures that would have been widely used at the time. This is a big surprise! People are using the name given to the God who split the Red Sea and brought the Israelites out of Egypt to describe a vulnerable baby born to a poor family. The all-powerful God who may have felt too big to approach is now *actually with us* as one of us. God is near to us and God will know our human experience from the inside, not from a safely divine distance.
3. Not only does the story of Jesus’ birth show us God with us as humanity, in general, but further as God on our side, as human beings living in a world and under systems that constantly threaten to undermine our humanity. Under Emperor Augustus, who called for the census, the Roman empire entered a time called the “Pax Romana” (Roman Peace) – a time of “peace” and “stability” – except that it only looked that way. This political peace was achieved by killing off any enemies and suppressing anyone who disagreed with the ruling empire. The emperor, Caesar August, was referred to as Lord. The birth of Jesus is “good news of great joy for *all* the people,” not just the powerful or those who were useful to the Roman political machine. A new Lord is now on the scene, wrapped in cloth and lying in an animal’s trough. This means God does not operate by the rules of the world or any regime of what defines humanity as worthwhile. God is here to bring true peace and joy for everyone, starting with those whom the world has despised. God loves humanity enough to become human, not ruling with iron fist from above, but babbling from a manger in true human solidarity and compassion.

YOU:

Consider helping people think about the ways they shut God out of the very human, ordinary, or messy parts of their lives. Help people think about whether they imagine God to be far away, over and above them, or if they can imagine God experiencing their own very human challenges. Describe some ways they might look for Jesus and invite Jesus into the day to day. How might their relationship with Jesus shift if they truly believed Jesus experienced the same human life they do and was with them in the day to day?

What systems, institutions, circumstances, or people might be making your listeners doubt their worth or feel unable to express their fully humanity – what is stealing or crushing their humanity? Give some suggestions for what recognizing Jesus (the God-human!) as Lord might change as they relate to these forces. Perhaps it provides the courage speak out injustices, helps make the decision to leave a dehumanizing situation, or helps with inner strength if leaving if not an option. Make your examples more concrete in line with what you know your particular context.

WE:

As believers in and followers of Jesus Christ, we are affirmed in our full humanity and met there by the God who did not consider humanity “too low,” to be worthy of divine presence and love. Encourage your church, as a group, to think about how it shows the world *this* God. Do the church’s ministries and missions embody a God who is far off, who requires fanfare, who only responds to extravagant gifts and flashy demonstrations of faith, or do the church’s ministries and missions embody a God who meets people where they are, as they are, and offer them a place that nourishes their humanity in all its imperfections?



Week 5 Preaching Resources: God with the World (Sunday after Christmas)

Scripture Passage:

Luke 2:25-35

Focus Statement:

Help is here. Our temptation can be to think that we're alone in our wait for help, but the truth of Christmas is that help is already here. Simeon waited many years for the "consolation of Israel," and when he met Jesus, he was finally ready to rest.

ME:

Tell a story about a time that you were waiting for help. You were doing all you could on your own, but you desperately needed backup. Describe what it was like when you finally got the help you needed -- your relief, your peace.

WE:

If we're being honest, there are a whole lot of things we think we have to deal with on our own. We have finances to sort out on our own, relationship problems, parenting, caring for parents, and personal health issues that we think we have to sort out on our own. This story of Simeon assures us that just as God promised, help is on the way.

GOD:

Simeon waited for many years for a sign that help was coming to Israel. The Spirit had assured him he would not die before he saw the Messiah. This story shows an intense moment when Simeon finally saw the hope he had been waiting for his entire life. His first response was contentment, peace and rest. "Dismiss your servant in peace" (verse 29).

Knowing help is on the way relaxes us and helps us to breathe more easily. The message of Christmas, God coming in the flesh to be *with us* means that our help is here, and we do not have to do it alone. Of course, this doesn't mean all our problems will be fixed and everything will be better. Even in sharing the good news of God's help with Mary, Simeon recognized that Jesus' life would cause unrest in Israel ("the falling and rising of many") and personal pain and tragedy in Mary's life.

Yet, with Jesus' birth, God is with us and even the most difficult of challenges can be faced with a "very present help in trouble," (Psalm 46:1). Just as God was faithful to the promise God made to Simeon, so is God faithful to the promises God makes to us. In Jesus, who was born, lived, died, and rose for our sake, we will find our help in times of need.



YOU:

Remember God's promises to love and help you. Help *is* already here, but this is not as passive as it sounds. It requires our response, if we want to experience God's help in our day to day lives. Keep in mind Simeon was "righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel," he followed the Spirit's guiding him and recognized Jesus when he saw him. What are some ways you can ready yourself to receive help from God? How can you look for and look forward to help and follow where the Spirit might be leading you to receive, or maybe even to give God's help?

WE:

What would our lives actually look like if we trusted that God's help is here? What would it look like to rest in God's help and be a community that embodies God's help for each other, instead of trying to do it on our own?