



Week 1 Small Group: Zechariah, The Skeptic

OPENING PRAYER:

Holy God, One in Three, and Three in One, you are the one who formed us in your image and breathed into us the breath of life. You are the one who knows us, and our timelines better than we know them. You know our hopes, and our dreams, the prayers that have yet to be answered. Help us to listen for your voice, and to wait upon your movement. Help us to trust that your timing is the right timing. Help us to turn to you, even in the midst of unanswered prayers. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Quote:

"When the time is right, I the Lord, will make it happen." Isaiah 60:22

Breaking the Ice:

What was something you have hoped for that did not materialize the way you had expected?

Wrestling with the Word:

Read Luke 1:5-25; 57-80

- Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth prayed for many years for a child to be born to them, and it never seemed to happen. Elizabeth and Zechariah have resigned themselves to not being able to give birth to a child. However, when the time comes, Zechariah is chosen by lot to serve in the presence of the Lord. It is here that he hears the words that his wife is to have a son, and even more miraculously, that the son, John, will prepare people for the Lord. What do you think Zechariah felt when he heard this?
- It took far longer than expected for Zechariah and Elizabeth's prayers to be answered. What situations like this have you, or the people in your life faced? How does this affect your relationship with and understanding of God?
- Zechariah then had to stay silent during Elizabeth's pregnancy (which may or may not have been a good thing for Elizabeth...). We can imagine that it caused him to do a fair amount of reflecting on the incredible nature of God's work. Do you ever wish there were times when you were silent as you waited on what the Lord had for you? Do you think that the silence helped Zechariah to understand more about God?

NEXT STEPS:

- How can we have hope in a season of unanswered prayer?
- How do the promises of God help us continue to move forward even when things do not work as we wish for them?
- How can we be beacons of hope for the world even if we are still waiting?

CLOSING PRAYER:

Holy God, you are the one who knows and holds all things. Just as Zechariah moved from a skeptic to a believer in hope, help us to find hope for ourselves and those around us. In this season, help us to be patient and to expect the unexpected. In the name of Jesus, the Christ, the bringer of hope, amen.



Week 2 Small Group: Joseph the Dutiful

OPENING PRAYER:

Holy God, you are the one who gives us the strength to do the seemingly impossible. Help us to trust you, even when the world may not understand it. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Quote:

"Do what is right, not what is easy." Roy T. Bennett

BREAKING THE ICE:

When have you chosen to do what was right and not necessarily easy?

WRESTLING WITH THE WORD:

Read Matthew 1:18-25

- Joseph's decision to stick by Mary's side even though he had every right to leave her was an impressive one; he did not have to, and yet he chose to do the right thing, trusting that God was leading him in the right direction. What do you think you would have done?
- How do you think the conversation between Mary and Joseph went initially? How do you think the conversation went after Joseph's dream encounter with the angel and Joseph decided to stay?
- The choice Joseph made was a difficult one and it could have had grave consequences for both Mary's and Joseph's lives moving forward. Yet, Joseph did what God called him to do no matter what. Have you ever been in a situation where what you sensed God calling you to do was different from what society or your social group would have dictated?

NEXT STEPS:

- What has been the most difficult thing for you to follow God through?
- How does Joseph's story inspire you to live out your journey with Christ?
- How does Joseph's story remind us that God is with us in everything?

CLOSING PRAYER:

God, lead us as we leave this place and help us to trust you in all that we do. You guide us, and we desire to do the impossible through you. In the name of Jesus, the Christ, amen.



Week 3 Small Group: Mary, the Faithful

OPENING PRAYER:

Holy God, you know where you have called us. You know the plans you have for us, even when we do not seem to understand them. Guide us as we meet today to choose faith over fear. In the name of Jesus, amen.

Quote:

“Faith is taking the first step even when you don’t see the whole staircase.” Martin Luther King Jr.

BREAKING THE ICE:

What is the bravest thing you have ever done?

WRESTLING WITH THE WORD:

Read Luke 1:26-38

- Imagine what it would have been like to be Mary who is approached by a heavenly being who tells her that she is going to have a baby- a baby from God- before she is even married. What might that have felt like? How would you have responded if you were Mary?
- Mary asks the question, “How is this going to happen?” which seems logical in the situation. Have you ever been in a situation where you want to know how something is supposed to happen, asking “but how will this be?” What gave you the confidence to move forward even when you did not understand it?
- Mary puts her trust in God over her fear of what others will say about her, or how she will be treated. What must that have been like for Mary? How do you imagine she came to that decision?

NEXT STEPS:

- When have you faced something that forced you to make a choice between your faith and your fear?
- How have you been challenged to choose faith in this season?
- How can you help your community to choose bold faith where they might be afraid?

CLOSING PRAYER:

God, as we leave this time together, may you bless us with a desire to go boldly where you call us, to choose trusting you instead of being overcome by fear. Lord, help us to choose you even when it scares us. Show us where our community is called to move boldly in your name. Send your Spirit to guide us. In your name we pray. Amen.



Week 4 Small Group: Shepherds and the Dismissed

OPENING PRAYER:

Holy One, you are the God of the unexpected, the God of the outsiders, the God of the imperfect. Help us to remember that you love us because you created us, not because we have earned it. Help us to listen to your voice calling us to something greater. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

Quote:

"This is what God's kingdom is like: a bunch of outcasts and oddballs gathered at a table, not because they are rich or worthy or good, but because they are hungry, because they said yes. And there's always room for more." Rachel Held Evans

BREAKING THE ICE:

When have you experienced being moved from the sidelines to center stage?

WRESTLING WITH THE WORD:

Read Luke 2:8-20

- The shepherds were not the kind of people to whom you would have expected the angels to reveal the good news of the Messiah's birth. What does this story help us understand about God?
- The shepherds only understand a fraction of the story about the birth of the Messiah, and yet they go to see the baby Jesus anyway. How can we respond with such faith in our individual lives and in the life of our congregation?
- What might it mean that Jesus' birth is announced to the outcasts and that those on the margins are the first people outside Jesus' immediate family who know about the birth of the Messiah? What does that tell us about Christ's ministry?

NEXT STEPS:

- How does the story of the shepherds help us understand who God calls us to be, and how our communities should look?
- What hope does this story bring us in this Christmas season and every day?
- How can our communities continue to reflect the meaning of Christmas throughout the year?

CLOSING PRAYER:

God, as we prepare to leave this space, help us to hold space in our hearts for the true meaning of Christmas, that you are with us in our imperfectness, in our pain, in our joy, and in our hope. Help us to remember that you are the One who loves us always, and you are the one who calls us up from the sidelines and on to the center stage in your story. In Jesus' name, amen.