



Week 1 Preaching Resources: Are You Sure You're Up for This?

Scripture Passage: Mark 8:27-38

Focus Statement: “Taking up our crosses” to be disciples of Jesus means being willing to risk inconvenient demands on our time, lack of certainty, embarrassment, and sometimes even physical danger. But Jesus is the way to life, and he calls us to make fresh starts in faith. A fresh start requires courage, focus, and practice.

ME: Introduce the idea of a fresh start, and the many ways that happens. Definition of a fresh start: “a complete change in your way of life or the way that you do things, especially after you have previously been unsuccessful.” Describe a time when you were unsuccessful at something and to move forward you needed to completely redo things. Your example can be tangible or abstract (e.g., building something, new job, new relationship, new attitude, new of responding to circumstances).

WE: Ask the congregation if they have ever had to change their perspective on something. Describe a time when your church had to let go of something. How does your church tend to respond when they have to let go of established ideas/ways of doing things to make room for something new?

GOD:

- 1) Sometimes, difficult times necessitate a “fresh start.” A few chapters earlier (Mark 6), John the Baptist, who had come to prepare the way for the Messiah, was killed. A new leader was needed. The religious leaders are testing Jesus for a sign that he is/is not the Messiah (Mark 7-8). In this chapter (Mark 8), Jesus flips the understanding of who the Messiah is and what the Messiah is supposed to do (verse 31). Peter did not expect the Messiah to suffer and is resistant to that reality. No one would have expected a Messiah to be rejected by the religious leaders and killed, let alone rise from the dead, nor would anyone has expected that the people’s salvation would come this way. This new kind of “suffering servant” Messiah was offering a very big picture “fresh start.” It was a fresh start God’s way, not the human way, which made it difficult for Peter to understand (v. 32-33).
- 2) Jesus did not suffer simply for the sake of suffering or to be seen as a victim. The purpose of Jesus’ suffering was to lift others up, especially those on the outside/margins, and bring them to healing and

fullness of life. We see Jesus in the passages that lead up to this statement willing to take the risk of relationships with those who are on the outside. You may give an example or two. Lifting up the marginalized and upsetting the status quo necessarily entailed the risk of suffering. It was a risk Jesus knew and was willing to take for the sake of the big picture God-sized fresh start he was sent for.

- 3) The Gospel of Mark is about expectations and who you are in Christ. The tone of the gospel is imperative - the time is now, for a new thing is happening! Jesus is announcing that to be his followers, people need to be willing to suffer, to “take up their cross and follow him.” Again, this is not suffering for the sake of suffering. In following Jesus’ way of lifting up those on the outside, and letting Jesus live in and through us, even when it is not what we might have chosen, we risk and accept the possibility of suffering. Taking up one’s cross, pointing to Jesus’ final sacrifice, leads to salvation. Our being willing to deny ourselves will also lead to life in unity with Jesus.

YOU: Invite people to consider where they might be (or have been) resistant, like Peter, to the kind of fresh start Jesus offers, or where they may not have full understanding of what God is doing and why. Against the messages we sometimes hear in this world, when you give your life to Christ, there is no promise that your life will be devoid of suffering. Following Christ might even bring about suffering! Ask your congregation about how they might invite a fresh start by being honest about their expectations of a life of faith. How will they be open to taking up their cross?

WE: This is an opportunity for you to challenge your congregation to move into the new thing that God is doing, even if it requires taking up the cross. How is the church being called to deny itself for the sake of the gospel? Consider your community demographics where the church serves. How have they changed? What might it look like to bear the cross in your community? How will you challenge them to follow Jesus in this way?



Week 2 Preaching Resources: Hens and Chicks

Scripture Passage: Luke 13:31-35

Focus Statement: Jesus refused to be distracted from his divine mission by dangers or frustrations. We are called to follow his example of steadfast purpose in fulfilling our mission. A fresh start requires steadfast purpose and accepting God's embrace.

ME: In the midst of change there are people who might sabotage you or make a fresh start difficult. People may miss or resist the "why" of your change, the reason for it. Talk about a time when you faced obstacles to a fresh start or when you, yourself, resisted change.

WE: Jesus is talking to the religious people of the time. Ask the congregation to consider how people of faith have resisted God's purpose. When has God offered the church or the community a fresh start, but they have resisted or refused (e.g., a new pastor, a change of music, use of technology, how we pray, who we serve or with whom we serve)?

GOD:

- 1) While the gospels and biblical interpretation often present the Pharisees in a negative light, here we can see that there were some Pharisees who were not hostile to Jesus (v. 31). They want him to play it safe but, like the other Pharisees and even many of Jesus' own disciples, they do not get it. They do not understand why he would risk danger to himself for the sake of his purpose. Even though their intentions are good, they are still resisting the new thing Jesus is doing in his ministry of casting out demons and performing cures. Despite the real and present danger, Jesus persists even when it is not understood or accepted. How often do we get sidetracked from the new thing God is doing in and through us – sometimes even by well-intended people (whether that be others or ourselves)?
- 2) The animal illustrations show the extremes: a fox is dangerous, risky, a predator. A hen is protective, loving, and caring. In this text, Jesus calls Herod a fox. Herod is the type of person who kills those who oppose him, rather than risking change (fresh starts can feel threatening to those who dislike change!).

God, as shown in Jesus, is both redeemer and protector. In Jesus, we are offered a fresh start and freedom from the oppressor. Yet, in a fight between a fox and a hen, a fox is much more likely to win. Jesus once again defies expectations here choosing the gentle strength of a hen instead of the violent strength of a fox. This continues a pattern that has been established in Luke just prior to this text (Luke 13:18-30), where the lesser or apparently “smaller” turns out to be greater (e.g., yeast, mustard seed, the least, and the last).

- 3) Jesus is lamenting over the city he loved and tried to minister to, but they refused him. Jerusalem is known for killing those who were sent by God (prophets, such as John the Baptist). This is another example of how humanity resists the change that God offers that will lead to salvation. Note: Jesus quotes Psalm 118:26 saying, “you will not see me until the time comes when you say, ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.’” This is also a reference to/foreshadowing of the Palm Sunday narratives when Jesus enters Jerusalem lauded as Messiah before later being crucified that week. Jesus knows, even at this point, that his purpose will lead him to and through both the praise and the rejection of the people. Nothing (neither others’ praise nor their rejection) will stop him from his ministry, the fresh start he has to offer the world.

YOU: Invite people to consider how they tend to resist the vision that God offers. When God offers a fresh start, God offers vision as well as protection. God will offer strength from unexpected places, sometimes in ways that will not be recognized by the world or those around us. Ask people how they have seen God’s vision in hindsight. How can this strengthen their faith that God is at work today in this fresh start?

WE: Often when you are making a change, there will be people who will not see your vision. There will be people who, like Jerusalem, cannot see how God is at work doing something new. Suggest how your community can be lovingly persistent in their God-given purpose as they face challenges and possibly even resistance.



Week 3 Preaching Resources: Ten Lepers. How Many Miracles?

Scripture Passage: Luke 17:11-19

Focus Statement: Jesus has the power to change lives through God's grace. Our own seemingly intractable flaws can be overcome, and we can change the world in response to the change offered to us. A fresh start begins with living in awe and gratitude of God's gifts.

ME: There were 10 lepers that were healed but only one returns to give praise. This might cause us to ask ourselves, when God has offered us a fresh start, how have we responded? With awe and praise or letting the moment slip by unacknowledged? Share either a time when you received a change in your life from God with awe and praise, or a time when you received a change and maybe even never acknowledged it. (Be balanced in your stories in this series. Name sometimes when you have not been perfect.)

WE: Ask the congregation how they've responded to God's changing work in their lives. When we receive a fresh start, we have an opportunity to show gratitude. Give some examples of when change has been met with excitement. When has gratitude helped to sustain a fresh start? Examples can come from church experiences or stories from the congregation. It's often easy to see responses of excitement and thankfulness in children.

GOD:

- 1) Jesus intentionally chooses to travel through this region which is in between Samaria and Galilee. This would have been a region where lepers would have lived because it is outside the city. It is a borderland. Like other passages in Luke, Jesus is present with those are outcasts.
- 2) Jesus heals the lepers, however, only a priest could pronounce a person ritually "clean" (for more background information on this, you can look at Leviticus 13:2-3 and 14:2-32). This is why Jesus requires the lepers to go show themselves (healed) to the priests. Being named clean would mean that they would once again be accepted into society and have a fresh start.
Explore some possible reasons why only one leper returned. Was this Samaritan the only one who realized he was healed? When God is changing us and offering us a fresh start, do we even recognize it?

Are we willing to accept it and give praise? Maybe the others were so focused on being named clean by the priests that they didn't take the time to pause and give thanks for what Jesus had done. Consider naming the significance of the fact the one leper who offers praise is a Samaritan. A religious and ethnic outsider was able to grasp the importance of who Jesus was and what he was doing. As people of faith, do we sometimes miss what God is doing at a deeper level in our lives (or take it for granted) because of our expectations and preconceived ideas?

- 3) For all the lepers, their healing was not a change that happened instantly; they had to follow Jesus' instructions (to show themselves to the priests). As they did so, they were made clean. God invites us to be participants in our own process/experience of change. Although God is always the one who gives grace and healing, the degree to which we respond and engage with God affects our awareness and experience of it. Often, change takes place over time. Sometimes, this can be an obstacle to our offering praise. Perhaps we get frustrated that things take longer than we'd hoped or because they don't happen right away, we lose sight of the way change is happening slowly and over time, and we neglect to give God praise.

The man who turned back was not just healed. Because of his gratitude, he made a connection with Jesus that offered him more than healing or ritual cleanliness – he was made whole. His healing was not just physical, his "faith has made [him] well," (v. 19). How might we be missing out on greater wellness and wholeness because we are not taking the time to stop, connect with God, and show gratitude?

YOU: In the biblical sense, to praise means to shout for joy. Name that in the scripture it says the man called out with a loud voice. How might people in your congregation voice their praises? Ask the congregation what might be holding back their praises? The leper begins praising God from the moment the miracle happens, then bows down, before Jesus in thanksgiving and gratitude. Offer some practices of praise and gratitude individuals in the congregation can add to their daily spiritual disciplines.

WE: This is an opportunity to grow your congregation's sense of awe and gratitude. How do you/will you, give your congregation permission to praise God? Name that in our culture loud, boisterous praise happens often – at sports events, concerts, other events. Invite the congregation to partake in a time of praise and thanksgiving for all that they have received through God's gifts. Pause and allow people to respond. For different people and congregations, vocal praise may be more or less comfortable. Practice is key! Be attuned to your congregation's comfort level with vocalizing praise and bring them along accordingly. You may have to go first to set an example.



Week 4 Preaching Resources: Salvation in the House

Scripture Passage: Luke 19:1-10

Focus Statement: A bold act of inclusion changed the life of Zacchaeus the tax collector as well as the whole community. How many lives can we transform if we really devote ourselves to inclusion? A fresh start requires being open to Jesus' invitation to us as well as to those who are not valued in our community – the outcasts or the marginalized.

ME: Describe a situation when you felt like you were not enough or not valued in your community. Or share when you might have given into community pressure and not included someone. Remember in this story, the community did not see Zacchaeus, a tax collector, as worthy of hosting Jesus as a guest.

WE: In our culture(s) and even congregations, there are various groups of people who, like tax collectors, have a reputation for doing injustices to the community. (Sometimes, the church has this reputation in the broader world too.) Who would your community resist giving a fresh start to? Even within one church/community, if there is division along particular issues or lines, this question might be answered differently depending on who is being asked!

GOD:

- 1) It was a bold act for Jesus to calling on Zacchaeus and choose him as host. In the ancient world, who you had a meal with meant something. Jesus did not give in to community pressure not to engage Zacchaeus, an outcast. Even though Zacchaeus was Jewish by birth, his job as a tax collector led to his rejection by the community because tax collectors worked for the ruling Roman empire and so were seen as cheaters/betrayers. As chief tax collector, Zacchaeus was seen as an even worse offender. The community is upset at Jesus' actions (they "grumble").
- 2) The encounter with Jesus changes Zacchaeus. It not only offers him new life, "salvation," but a restored relationship in the community. (Perhaps more accurately, restored relationship is part of what salvation is). In seeing Zacchaeus as more than just a tax collector, as a son of Abraham, like the rest of the

community, Jesus sees him as a human being with worth in God's eyes. This interaction leads to accountability and Zaccheus' repentance, followed up with justice. Not only Zaccheus, but also the community is restored through these acts of reconciliation. A fresh start with Jesus has an impact on many.

- 3) Jesus says that he, "came to seek out and save the lost," (v. 10). In the case of Zacchaeus, that was someone who was seen as a bully or traitor in the community. Often, Christians are comfortable with the idea that Jesus saves "the lost" who belong to certain categories (e.g., "poor," "homeless"). But this passage challenges us to see understand "the lost" as including even those who have sinned against us, who have harmed our communities, or who we consider 'enemies'. This radical inclusion of the "lost" or the "sinner" is not the same as accepting or condoning the harm they've committed, but it does mean extending hospitality, seeing them as people, as opening the door for repentance, justice, and reconciliation.

YOU: Jesus invites us into fresh starts that will change us and that ultimately can restore the communities to which we belong. Remind your congregation that Jesus offers all people relationship right where they are. Do they hear Jesus' invitation in their own life? Are they willing to trust that Jesus invites others too? Invite your congregation to consider who they would not invite to their dinner table. How can they begin to interact with those they might see as unworthy of a fresh start (e.g., a neighbor, family member, or even politician)?

WE: Jesus offers a fresh start to everyone today. As the body of Christ, how will your congregation be used to invite others to see the fresh start God has in store for them? Offer some suggestions on where you can begin. Make this a challenge – be bold!