



## Week 1 Preaching Resources: Peace Made Possible

**Scripture Passage:** Isaiah 2:2-5

**Focus Statement:** God, in Jesus, invites us into a change of mindset, to be agents of peace, offering us a new possibility for relating to others, a way of peace.

**ME:** This is the first Sunday of Advent. While this season brings excitement, it can also be difficult. Share a story about a stressful relationship or situation you have experienced during the Advent/Christmas season.

**WE:** We all realize that the Hallmark family Christmas season is not reality. The chaos and busyness around the holidays can cause us to and others to be impatient and irritable with one another. Those who are mourning or experiencing sickness may experience emotional or physical difficulties during this time. Inter-family relations around the table and the tree can be difficult to navigate.

**GOD:** In the midst of these trying situations, God is at work offering peace. Peace is “shalom” in Hebrew. Shalom is not simply an absence of war but rather, an abundance of life.

1. The kind of peace Isaiah speaks about might seem impossible to us both globally (nations getting along, no more war), and in our own hectic lives. This prophesy comes from a time where the people were experiencing conflict, war, and stress too (see Isaiah 1). The peaceful scene described in our passage is “in the days to come” (verse 2:2). In Advent, too, we are in a period of waiting and longing for a time of peace that might seem far away. But we are also invited to prepare, to “go up to the mountain” and receive instructions on the path of peace. The path of peace is God’s way, not our own way or the world’s way. In Jesus, we are given a model of “God’s ways that we may walk in his paths,” (Isaiah 2:3). We are taught to prepare for, work for and walk in the peace that we trust God will bring to full fruition.
2. The prophet talks about beating “swords into plowshares” and “spears into pruning hooks.” God’s peace does not *just* stop conflict. It brings about transformation. The tools once used for violence and destruction in war, are now used to bring new life in harvest. We are invited to the mountain to have our mindset reshaped too, just like the swords and spears. Jesus already transformed a tool for death (the cross) into the gift of new life (resurrection). How can we let Jesus transform us and reshape the way we approach our own lives, especially the Advent season? Give some examples that will connect with your congregation.



3. The prophet paints a picture of the day when the mountain (Zion) will be a place where all the nations learn about God's peaceable ways. That means as God's people we are called to be *agents* of peace— "not lifting up sword against nation neither shall they learn war anymore," (verse 4). Even though the passage is talking about a promised future, it ends with a call to "come, let us walk in the light of the Lord," (verse 5)! We are to model for the world how to walk in the light of the Lord. How do others see Jesus' light in our lives as peacemakers?

\*\*Preachers should do some research background on Isaiah for this series.

**YOU:** Some questions the preacher can consider posing: When have you allowed the stress of a relationship to bring more disharmony? When have you modeled for others a peaceful resolution? Who in your life has modeled peaceful resolution or been an agent of peace or peacemaker? Where can you act in your own life to model such peace? What are some ways you can prioritize the peace (shalom) of wholeness and abundance rather than the false peace of keeping everyone happy or ignoring problems?

**WE:** Jesus is the Prince of Peace. He came to bring peace to everyone. Share ways that the congregation has made peace possible (been agents of peace/peacemakers) in the community. What difference has it or can it make in the world?



## Week 2 Preaching Resources: Hope Made Possible

**Scripture Passage:** Isaiah 11:1-10

**Focus Statement:** God with us gives us hope. When we know God through Jesus, we can have hope that one day all will be restored.

**ME:** Share an experience where you have felt lost, overwhelmed, or hopeless. What was it like? Where did you turn?

**WE:** We've all been in situations where we have been overwhelmed or didn't have the answers we were looking for or lacked the hope that we could get through the challenge we were facing. And sometimes when we consider all the injustices and oppressions that are occurring in the world, we can be driven to hopeless and despair. Describe some feelings this may bring up in people.

**GOD:** In the midst of the overwhelming and hopeless times, God is at work. The people who received this prophecy were living in fear of Assyrian armies. In the previous chapter (Isaiah 10), God (through the prophet) acknowledges and describes this persecution and points out their own role in the current situation. They have been unjust in their treatment of the marginalized (see Isaiah 10:1-2). When a people relies on a strong army, unjust rulers, and manipulation to get their way, they can expect to find more of the same when things go awry. Nevertheless, Isaiah speaks a word of hope from the God who promises to make a way and a future despite human corruption and brokenness. If God is their hope for the future, they can turn to God for help now. They can turn from their unjust ways of getting what they want and trust God to give them what they need. Where did the people of Israel and where do we turn for help and hope?

1. As Mr. Rogers says, look for the helpers in those times. Who is there to bring hope? Jesus offers us hope. Look at all of the qualities of the Spirit described in Isaiah 11:2-3. Those are the qualities that belong to Jesus. They offer hope in the face of powers and events that seem impossible to endure. They contrast with the false sense of stability offered by the world. Jesus offers us hope and invites us to participate in it. This is not a "cross your fingers" type of hope. It is not simply a desire for something good to happen. It is a confident expectation that something good will happen because God has promised it. Biblical hope indicates a trust in the Lord. We can live out that hope every day by embodying virtues of wisdom, understanding, counsel, might (strength/fortitude), knowledge and fear of the Lord.



2. There is a plan for redemption at work that offers us hope. The “shoot that shall come out from the stump of Jesse” (Isaiah 11:1) was expected to be a new political leader for Israel from the house of King David. It was political hope in the face of a political problem. Yet, in Jesus, we see that, like a tiny shoot growing up into a strong branch, a baby is given who is hope for the world. Jesus is hope for our whole lives and for all of creation.
3. God has a redemption plan in place to right every wrong. The images the prophet uses are extreme and seem *impossible* (verses 6-8). This points to the fact that our hope is not in our own efforts but can only be in God, for whom nothing is impossible. Also notice how expansive this redemption is ... it is not limited to Christians, to religious people, or even to human beings; it encompasses all of creation. Just as redemption is for all creation, so is hope. Isaiah says, “the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples, the nations shall inquire of him,” As the body of Christ in the world, the church has a responsibility to “signal” (vs. 10), bear or model hope to the world, to make people “inquire” (vs. 10) or ask, “where does that hope from?” We will confidently answer, “Our help comes from Jesus, the root of Jesse!”

**YOU:** Some questions the preacher can pose: Have you witnessed examples of people in your life that have offered hope to you during overwhelming situations? How can you share that hope with others who are feeling hopeless? Act on it this week.

**WE:** In your community, where can the congregation be the helpers? Are there families/individuals who are struggling with hopelessness because of a lack of resources? How can we or do we as a congregation support them and offer them hope of a brighter future?



### Week 3 Preaching Resources: Joy Made Possible

Scripture Passage: Isaiah 35:1-10

**Focus Statement:** God's deliverance of Israel and of us is cause for joyful celebration – human celebration and the celebration of all creation!

**ME:** Give an example of a time when you found joy in a transformation, whether it be a transformation in yourself or in someone else. Was it a long process? Were there times when transformation seemed impossible?

**WE:** What about on a larger scale? Has there been a big transformative experience in your church? What joy did that sow? As the body of Christ, we can help one another find joy in supporting one another as we continually grow closer to God and to one another.

**GOD:** The coming of Jesus, something many didn't think possible, is a source of transformative joy for all creation. This type of joy is not simply a state of happiness or good pleasure. Joy is dependent on who Jesus is and what Jesus offers, rather than on what is happening around us. It is a deep seated and pervasive way of being that can sustain us even through difficulties and times when we don't *feel* happy.

In this Isaiah text we see three ways joy is at work. You may choose to highlight one or more of these ways depending on your congregation's context and needs. If you highlight more than one, think about what order makes the most sense. They are described here in the order they show up in the reading.

1. The joy of all creation: In verses 1-2 and 6b-7, the passage describes the joy of creation. The earth itself blossoms in the desert where that didn't seem possible and creation itself sings out praises to God. Just like with peace and hope in the last two weeks' readings, the prophet is describing a promised future here. This joyful celebration of all creation may seem *impossible* and hard to imagine, especially as our planet and environment face grim challenges today. But in the gift of Jesus, God in the world with and for us, we have been given a promise of redemption for *all creation*. This promise is the source of our joy, and it allows us to experience joy here and now. In the meantime, Advent teaches us to wait actively for that day by preparing for it. Only God can make "the dry land glad and the desert rejoice and blossom"; however, if we believe in God's promise to do this, it belongs to us to prepare for its fulfilment. This might be a time to highlight earth care and environmental stewardship. What does it look like for your congregation to faithfully anticipate God's deliverance of all creation?



2. Transformative joy: In verses 3-6a, the passage highlights the transformative power of joy. *As you preach from today's text, have an awareness that verses 5 and 6 may be heard in a way that does not celebrate various abilities. We ask that you exercise caution.* After describing a future joy-filled creation, the prophet describes the people being encouraged, praying for strength and courage for those who are suffering, weak, and afraid. Verse 4 says, "Here is your God." This is the message of Christmas too, that here, in this Jesus, is our God. "He will come and save you." It may not be the vengeful type of salvation pictured in Isaiah, but it is most definitely a salvation that strengthens and casts out fear! *This* God, the God we see in Jesus, is the source and reason for our joy. The joy of his salvation is what transforms us from weakness and fear to strength and courage as we await the day when all creation will celebrate!
3. Human joy on the way: The image of a path, journey, or way comes up a lot in scripture. We saw it in week 1 too, when we talked about learning God's ways of peace that we may walk in his paths. Here, again, in verse 8 we learn about a holy highway to this place of peace, hope, and joy. Jesus is *the Way* (John 14:6) that we travel on this Christian life. In the waiting time of Advent, the image of a highway reminds us that waiting is not passive or stationary. While we wait for what only God can do, we also move forward on God's way. And, as described in verses 8-10, we get to experience joy along the way. Joy is not reserved for the destination. It is a deep abiding presence on the journey. This joy can lead us towards seeing the impossible become a reality.

**YOU:** We can encourage one another as we journey the path God is calling us to follow. Recognizing and celebrating one another is a great way for transformation to flourish. What can each of us do today/this week to lift one another up in our journeys of faith? Or you might consider asking people to look at it from this angle: What needs to shift to start looking for and experiencing real joy in what Jesus has done instead of expecting to find our joy in things that can only give us temporary happiness/pleasure and that will often disappoint? How might we tap into that deeper source of our joy as we travel toward Christmas this year?

**WE:** How can we as a church community use this season of Advent and the start of a new year as a time to make what we once thought of as impossible, possible? What in our own community needs to be transformed through the coming of Christ so that the world may have more joy?



## Week 4 Preaching Resources: Love Made Possible

Scripture Passage: Matthew 1:18-25

**Focus Statement:** On many levels – Divine possibility - Joseph seeing beyond the circumstances to love Mary/Jesus, Jesus is God’s love for us made incarnate, Jesus gives us the possibility to love in a way that is beyond what we could do on our own.

**ME:** Share a sign, experience, or image of abiding love during the Advent/Christmas season.

**WE:** Many of us have experienced love made possible during the Advent season. But it is not always so simple. We might also be anxious about getting people the right presents, nervous about seeing relatives we have not seen in a year and wondering about the road conditions on Christmas Eve. Sure, the Advent season is one of peace, hope, joy and love, but it is not always so simple.

**GOD:** Today, God shares with us an abiding love even in the most difficult situations, as we turn to the New Testament and hear the story of Joseph’s encounter with the angel in Matthew 1:18-25. In this passage, we see love made possible by in a number of ways. Consider focusing on one or more of the following:

1. We see love made possible by the Creator sending Jesus into the world, a miracle! This is agape love, God’s love for all humankind. This passage harkens back to Isaiah 7:14, where it says, “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means “God is with us.” When this promise was made by the prophet Isaiah, it would have been impossible to imagine that this child would actually be God-in-the-flesh. The promised child in Isaiah was depicted as a *sign* from God to the current king of Judah (Ahaz) when he was making military and political choices. The idea that God could be present in human form was *impossible* but a love of this depth becomes possible in the person of Jesus. Jesus takes Isaiah’s prophecy to the next level. This is what the Advent/Christmas season is all about. You might explore how God explodes our expectations (doesn’t just give us a “sign” but actually shows up!).



2. We see love made possible in the assurance God provides to Joseph (and Mary, in Luke 2) through the angel's message of comfort. This happens in the midst of Joseph's anxiety and decision to "dismiss" Mary. We may not always get messages from angelic beings, but God provides assurance and comfort to us in times of anxiety and difficult decision making too. Give some examples of ways this might happen (e.g., a friend or family member who is supportive, helps you affirm you in making the right decision). Sometimes we do not even realize this comfort and assurance is an expression of love from God until long after the fact. It can take practice to start noticing where God's love is showing up day to day.
3. We see love made possible in Joseph (and Mary) saying "yes" to being the earthly parent of Jesus. The scripture states that Joseph "did as the angel of the Lord commanded him." What trust this must have taken! Help people to think about areas where they/we need to trust God and the Lord's deep love for us? Are we being asked to do or face something difficult or something that might have unknown and daunting consequences? Explore how Joseph (and Mary's) can be an example for us of trusting God's love is at work even when it seems against all odds. God abides in love with us today. Just as God was with Joseph through this difficult and confusing time, God is with us today in our own struggles that we experience even during this joyful Advent season.

**YOU:** Where have you seen or experienced God's love for you this Advent season? Where can you be a sign of God's love to someone else? Let's take a moment of silence as each of us offers a silent prayer of (1) "thank you" for the love of God and others and (2) name a place or person that needs to know God's abiding love. "Dear God in this advent season I want to thank you for the love I have seen or experienced in *(pause, let people fill it in)*. Today I am also praying that your love might be revealed by me in the following person's life or situation *(pause, let people silently fill it in)*."

**WE:** As a congregation, we are a sign of God's love made possible in the world. Name instances of how the congregation has lived into this calling.



## Christmas Eve Preaching Resources: The Impossible Made Possible

Scripture Passage: Luke 2:1-14, (15-20)

**Focus Statement:** Through the gift of Jesus Christ, God makes the impossible – forgiveness and salvation – possible.

**ME:** Share a story about a gift you thought was impossible to receive that you ended up receiving. (It can be a story from childhood or adulthood.)

**WE:** Have you received an impossible gift or given an impossible gift? What feelings did that stir up for you? (Maybe impossible means extremely generous, something you thought would never be possible, something completely unexpected. You might think of different ways a gift could be seen as “impossible”.)

**GOD:** God gives the impossible gift of forgiveness and salvation through Jesus. Through the gift of forgiveness and salvation through Jesus Christ, we now have the realized hope of lives filled with peace, hope, love, and joy.

1. God brings the gift of life in the midst of the mundane and routine. During the chaos of the census, Jesus enters the world. You might draw some parallels with the mundane, routine, or chaotic aspects of present-day life. So often we romanticize the story of that first Christmas because our perspective allows us to see it as a time when God did something new and incredible. However, if we really think about what was happening in the world and in the lives of Mary and Joseph, there was nothing that made their circumstances any more likely to receive God’s gift than ours. They faced a lot of real-life challenges. God does the seemingly impossible for us here and now too, by giving us the gift of new and eternal life no matter what our circumstances. That is the point – God gave of Godself to give us the impossible gift of divine presence here in the middle of our mundane, routine, and sometimes chaotic lives.
2. As we are reminded in John 3:16, God loves the world so much that God *gave* God’s son. What is God asking us to give? The shepherds and the angels could not wait to share the news of Jesus’ birth. In response God’s impossible gift of God’s own self in Jesus, they gave their testimony of what they saw so that all they met would be able to “be amazed” (vs 18) and share in the gift too. How do we tell others about God’s gift of Jesus?



3. Mary pondered, the shepherds proclaimed, Joseph was silent. They all responded in different ways to this seemingly impossible gift. This gives us permission and space to respond differently too. Some of us might be more contemplative at Christmas times, where others are celebrating loudly, and yet others might not have anything to say at all. God's gift does not depend on our response; it will always be there. You might encourage people to reflect on how they are receiving and responding to God's gift of Jesus in this season.

**YOU:** Have you struggled with responding to an unexpected gift? Did you share it on social media or send pictures to family and friends? This gift of forgiveness and salvation through Jesus Christ is being offered to you. How will you respond? Will you accept this gift? Will you share this gift? How will you share it? The preacher can provide some examples.

**WE:** As a congregation, what are some opportunities to share the message of this impossible gift that has been made possible in your community? What practical ways can you offer the impossible?



## Sunday after Christmas: God Found in Impossible Places

Scripture Passage: Matthew 2:13-23

Focus Statement: God can be found even in the least expected places.

**ME:** Share an example of a place where you didn't want to be or had a negative bias towards, yet you found goodness there.

**WE:** What are places that we tend to look down on? Think of your church context and maybe how it interacts with other areas. How do we talk about places that we may hold judgements about?

**GOD:** Joseph ends up having to bring Mary and Jesus from place to place, fleeing persecution, but ultimately ends up in Nazareth. Jesus later becomes known as "Jesus of Nazareth". Nazareth was not a well-respected or highly viewed area of the world at that time, and no one would have expected that God would be living there.

1. In John 1:46, Nathanael asks, "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" Think of a time when God was found where it would have been least expected.
2. In Exodus 12:31-33, the people of Israel flee Egypt, yet in today's text, Joseph ends up bringing Mary and Jesus there for safety, even if briefly. This is also an unexpected choice. Imagine the negative associations they would have had with Egypt, being people whose ancestors had been enslaved there. Think of an example of something (an experience, place, process, etc.) that people may have once been viewed negatively, but that God could transform. How can we be open to God's leading when God leads us to places, experiences, etc., that we are afraid of, or hurt by? (This is not to say we should always go where we don't want to, but to listen for where God is leading us, even if it is somewhere unexpected).
3. Joseph consistently followed God's guidance. Time was definitely of the essence. Think of a time where quick action and careful listening to God has been beneficial.



**YOU:** God comes to you wherever you are. God isn't only found in our church building or where one expects to find God. This week invite individuals to keep their eyes open for where they see God and take note! Your church can celebrate these findings during next week's joys and concerns or time of sharing.

**WE:** We can look for God anywhere and everywhere, even where it seems impossible to find God. In the New Year, we can continue to work through our bias's that keep us from seeing God's abundant presence. What might this look like for your congregation?