

December 18 Lesson: John the Baptist Appears

Winter Quarter 2022-2023: From Darkness to Light
Unit 1: God's Preparation

Sunday School Lesson for the week of December 18, 2022
By Jay Harris

Lesson Scripture: Luke 3:2b-6, 15-18

Key Verse: *“He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”*

Lesson Aims

- To explore the reasons the word of God came to John in the wilderness of all places
- To ponder the significance of a movement based on repentance, forgiveness, and baptism
- To reflect on the use of Isaiah's prophecy and other prophecies to shed light on the Messiah
- To explore the “fruit in keeping with repentance”
- To explore the distinctions between John the forerunner and Jesus the Messiah
- To compare and contrast water baptism with being baptized with the Spirit and fire
- To examine the similarities and differences between John's baptism and Christian baptism

A Movement in the Wilderness

In this unit, we have learned that Luke's gospel begins with the birth story of Jesus and the birth story of John woven together. They overlap in the following manner:

- John's birth is announced to his father, Zechariah, by an angel
- John's mother, Elizabeth, conceives
- Jesus' birth is announced to his mother, Mary, by an angel
- Mary conceives (conceived by the Holy Spirit)
- Mary visits her relative, Elizabeth, while they are both pregnant
- Elizabeth gives birth to John
- Mary gives birth to Jesus

From this order, we learn how closely these births are interrelated. The same details unfold together in the combined story. The mothers were related by blood. The pregnancies overlapped one another. The mothers actually visited one another and remained with one another for three months. Luke tells these stories together because they unfolded together. All of this foreshadows how intertwined the lives of Jesus and John will be in adulthood and how their ministries will complement one another.

After the story of John's birth, we are given this summary of the years between John's birth and the beginning of his public ministry: "The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel." (Luke 1:80)

Today's scripture in the 3rd chapter of Luke is the first time we see John again since the story of his birth. It relates the story of how John, as an adult, first appeared publicly to Israel.

² The word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³ He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

We already knew what John was going to do with his life because he was set apart for his mission from birth. When the scripture says that "the word of God came to John...in the wilderness," we understand that this is John's call story. Saying that "the word of God came to John" was shorthand for saying that the call from God to prophetic ministry came to John. It was God confirming for John what his mission in life was to be and that it was time to begin. God impressed upon John the particular word, or message, that John was to give. This was the moment when John got his marching orders. It was the signal he needed to begin his public ministry.

The location of his ministry appears to have been chosen for him by God as well. He was called in the wilderness. He went into all that region around the Jordan. Going into all the region around the Jordan meant he travelled a certain amount in his preaching ministry. He covered enough territory to make contact with different groups of people, but it was limited to the Judean wilderness region around the Jordan River.

It was an arid rocky region. It was a setting that went along with John's austere, ascetic lifestyle. We've already been told that he abstained from wine or strong drink from birth. According to Matthew's gospel, John "wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey." (Matthew 3:4) He lived off the land. His life of self-denial was custom designed to make him more in tune with matters of the Spirit. Such a lifestyle formed his life as a prophet.

This location also meant that most of those who came out to hear him had to leave where they lived their daily lives and come to a desolate place. John's audience would have had the distinct feeling they were going on retreat. They were retreating from life's comforts and indulgences and going to a place where life comes down to the basics—spirituality, morality, and reliance on God.

Recall that it was in the wilderness, in the time of Moses, where God tried to teach his people to rely on God for food in the giving of manna. According to Deuteronomy, it was to humble God's people and help them learn that humans are not meant to live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God. (Deuteronomy 8:3)

Think about those who took this journey from the routines of daily life and into the wilderness to hear this powerful preacher. They would know undoubtedly that others were making this same

journey. They would likely have the sense they were checking out for themselves a movement being born in the wilderness. Some may have gone to the wilderness very deliberately to join the movement. Some may have gone to see what all the fuss was about—wary, but open.

Can you think of a time when you had to get out of your routine to hear God speak to you? Why does that make us more receptive? What was going on in those moments? What are ways to enter those kinds of moments without traveling far?

A Ministry Focusing on Baptism, Repentance, and Forgiveness

Another factor in the location, of course, was the Jordan River. The Jordan River courses from the north to the south from the fresh water lake known as the Sea of Galilee and eventually empties into the Dead Sea. It is a narrow, shallow, meandering river. You could say that it is made for baptisms. Luke tells us that John proclaimed a “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” This was the challenge that the people would hear when they went out to hear John. This is why we refer to John as “John the Baptist.”

Notice that this was a 1) message, 2) to be followed up by a life response, 3) symbolized by a ritual ceremony. The message about the meaning of repentance from our sins and God’s offer of forgiveness is something we need to know. We must not stop, however, with *knowing* about repentance and forgiveness. Such a message demands that we follow up with *action*—a whole life response. This life response was so important that it needed to be formalized through a decisive declaration expressed in the power of a sacred ritual.

What we need to know about repentance is that it is a process of turning. Confession or acknowledging our sin begins the turn. Accompanying our confession is a feeling of deep remorse. Sometimes the feeling of remorse comes before the acknowledgement. Whether it is our heart telling our head, or our head telling our heart, head and heart come together in repentance. The turn does not end with our head and heart. The turn continues as it is made manifest in action. There may be penance (actions intended to humble one’s self or impart self-discipline). This is where deep learning takes place so that we do not easily commit the offense again. Our repentance may involve making amends or restitution to repair any harm we have done and repair the relationship. Repentance is not complete however until we resolve not to commit the offense again. If the sin in question was a good thing that we should have done, but neglected to do, then we resolve to do that good thing in the future. To back our resolve, we make a plan. We make a plan to correct our course. We make a plan for translating initial actions into habits. Repentance is a process resulting in a life change. We resolve to grow.

The forgiveness of sins is God’s action. Forgiveness flows out of the grace of God—the undeserved, unmerited favor of God—the unconditional love of God. God’s grace not only follows our repentance, but it often precedes our repentance, creating the conditions for repentance to occur. Knowing that God loves me unconditionally, often gives me the courage to look at myself in the mirror more closely, defects and all. It is in the light of God’s love that I am able to see my unloving actions and sins more clearly. God’s grace begins the turn and completes the turn. Forgiveness is God liberating us—freeing us to begin again and walk in newness of life. When we forgive someone, we are freeing that person and simultaneously freeing ourselves.

This is why we pray, “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Forgiveness represents the restoration of a relationship. Repentance and forgiveness work together to strengthen the bonds of our relationship with God.

The baptism of John was a ritual cleansing. The sacred ritual of baptism symbolized the cleansing of a person from their sins. If a picture paints a thousand words, a ritual action paints exponentially more. A ritual action not only provides a visual, but it also involves the participant in an action that seers itself into the participant’s memory. The first baptism that I performed as a minister was in the baptistry of a country Baptist church. The water was not heated, and it was a chilly, Easter morning. Even through the waders I was wearing, I felt the icy cold of the water, and I did not even get wet. Billy, a twelve-year old, got wet. Whether the baptism is an immersion in water or water applied to one’s head, the one being baptized gets dripping wet. The symbolism of being cleansed in a public baptism would have been an intimate experience. At the same time, one would have gotten the impression that he or she was being personally initiated into a mass movement.

What would you say is your level of involvement in acts of repentance? Do you see yourself participating in all aspects of this turning? How and why might the process of repentance be watered down? What about your experience of God’s forgiveness? Is it difficult for you to believe you are forgiven? How might we project our insecurities onto God and doubt the unconditional love of God?

A Messianic Movement Foreseen by Isaiah and the Prophets

It is important that we keep in mind the larger context for this movement of repentance. The New Testament Church claimed the prophecy contained in the 40th chapter of Isaiah as the basis for John’s ministry. Other prophecies are claimed in the gospels as foundational to the ministry of John and the ministry of Jesus. The Church saw John as the voice of one crying out in the wilderness.

⁴ as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord;

make his paths straight.

⁵ Every valley shall be filled,

and every mountain and hill shall be made low,

and the crooked shall be made straight,

and the rough ways made smooth,

⁶ and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’ ”

How do we read these references from the Old Testament prophets? You could say that there are two different theological contexts in which to place these scriptures.

For God’s people living in the 6th century B.C., the original recipients of this prophecy, this message was part of a larger of message of hope promising the captives in Babylon that they

would be enabled to return to their homeland from the place of their exile. It will be as if a highway will be built in the desert for God's people to return. It will be for them as if the valleys will be filled in, the mountains leveled, the crooked pathways made straight, and the rough patches made smooth. All flesh will see God's salvation brought to a people who would have been thought to be utterly forsaken.

The 1st Century Church (A.D.) saw another fulfillment of this prophecy. They saw John the Baptist as the voice crying in the wilderness. They saw John as the one sent to prepare the way for the Messiah to come with his baptism ministry of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. John was preparing the people to receive the ministry of the coming Messiah.

Which meaning is the correct one? The good thing is we do not have to choose one interpretation over the other. Knowing how Isaiah's prophecy speaks to each group deepens the meaning. Jesus is the fulfillment of Old Testament longings. The themes of salvation are universal in scope. Our salvation history spans the ages. Bringing Old Testament images of salvation into New Testament applications helps us expand our understanding of the salvation God offers.

How has your study of God's Word been enriched by a growing understanding of both the Old Testament and New Testament? How would you explain the value of reading the Old Testament to a new Christian? What are your favorite connections to make between the message of the Old Testament prophets and their fulfillment in the gospels? How has your understanding of the salvation God offers been expanded as you have grown in your knowledge of God's Word?

Fruit in Keeping with Repentance

Although the main scripture passage we are studying skips verses 7 through 14 of chapter 3 of Luke, it is good to take a look at these verses. We see John comparing the crowds who came for baptism to a brood of snakes fleeing the wrath to come. John was rightly questioning their motives. He challenged them to "produce fruit in keeping with repentance." He cautioned them not to base their security on being a descendant of Abraham because God could easily produce children of Abraham out of the countless stones that littered the landscape, if that is what gave us security. If we are not producing fruit that is in keeping with repentance, we will undergo a pruning. Trees that stop producing fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

John now had the attention of the crowd. They asked, "What should we do then?" John gave them very specific challenges. "Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same." To tax collectors who were in the crowd, John told them not to collect more taxes than they were required to. To some soldiers, John told them to stop extorting money from people and issuing false charges against them, but instead, be content with their pay.

What do we make of these challenges? John was telling them how to make their repentance real—not just giving lip service. Fruit means evidence. We should be able to give evidence that our repentance is heartfelt and resulting in tangible expressions of us turning from our sins.

What evidence can you offer of a healthy life of repentance and turning from sin? If John looked straight at you, and you asked him, “What then should I do?” what do you think he might say to you?

The Need to Distinguish between John and the Messiah

¹⁵ As the people were filled with expectation and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶ John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the strap of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

With a ministry as dramatic as John’s, it is natural that some might think that John was the Messiah. John wanted to clear up that misconception quickly. John was the forerunner who was sent to prepare the way through this ministry of repentance, forgiveness, and baptism. The Messiah was the one who was coming who was more powerful than John. John was unworthy to be compared to the Messiah—to Jesus. John was not worthy to untie the strap of the Messiah’s sandals.

John also explained that the Messiah was not going to baptize anyone with water. John baptized with water, but Jesus did not baptize anyone that we know of. The Messiah, however, was going to lead people in a spiritual baptism, a spiritual immersion, a spiritual cleansing. Water baptism is a symbolic action, but the spiritual baptism Jesus offers is the real thing to which the symbol points. Jesus baptizes with the Holy Spirit and fire. Fire is another metaphor related to cleansing. Fire cleanses iron of its impurities. Or, to add another metaphor, fire is what you burn the disposable chaff with after the good wheat has been separated from the chaff and gathered on the threshing floor by the farmer’s winnowing fork. The spiritual baptism of Jesus results in us being cleansed from our sins, through the power of the Holy Spirit, revealing what God intended us to be.

Comparing and Contrasting John’s Baptism and Christian Baptism

So, when we are baptized in the Church, are we baptizing folks with the baptism of John? The answer is no. Recall, that right after John introduces the ministry of the Messiah, Jesus showed up. Jesus told John to baptize him. John protested because if anyone needed to baptize the other, John thought Jesus should baptize him. Jesus stated that John had to baptize him to fulfill all righteousness. It must have perplexed John, because John’s baptism was a baptism to symbolize the cleansing of persons from their sin. Jesus was the sinless one. Jesus had no sin from which to be cleansed.

Jesus underwent baptism in order to transform forever the meaning of baptism. Jesus had to be baptized so that every believer could be baptized into Christ. So, for us, baptism does not merely symbolize repentance and forgiveness. It is through baptism, according to the Church’s liturgy, that “we are incorporated into God’s mighty acts of salvation.” Although repentance and forgiveness are included in the meaning of baptism, Christian baptism goes further and

incorporates us into the saving mission and work of Christ. Now, we understand that repentance and forgiveness truly happen by being incorporated into Christ's death and resurrection. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we die to self and die to sin by dying with Christ and rising new to life through Christ. This is what is symbolized in Christian baptism. We are not left to do the work of repentance on our own. It happens through Christ.

Good News Includes Exhortation

The scripture passage we are examining concludes with this verse:

¹⁸ So with many other exhortations he proclaimed the good news to the people.

An exhortation is a strong challenge. A lot of the exhortation we have heard in this passage has been related to sin. Sin is a part of our human condition. The gospels do not shy away from talk about sin. The gospels address the subject of sin head on. With the call to repent of our sin comes the good news of our ability to repent of our sin through Christ. Read our scripture passage again, line by line, and say after each line, "That's good news!" Everything John's ministry offers is ultimately good news. Remember, that John was ushering in the ministry of the Messiah. This just marks the beginning of a movement that will turn the world upside-down.

Do you reflect on the meaning of your baptism often enough? Baptism is an act in which we participate once in our life, but Holy Communion is an act we are to celebrate as often as we will. How do you make the occasion of Holy Communion an opportunity to remember your incorporation into God's mighty acts of salvation? How well do you listen to the words of the Communion liturgy that you speak?

Prayer

Father in heaven, at the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan you proclaimed him your beloved Son and anointed him with the Holy Spirit. Grant that all who are baptized into his name may keep the covenant they have made, and boldly confess him as Lord and Savior, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, One God, in glory everlasting. Amen.

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