

Adult Teaching Resources

January 12, 2020



Season after Christmas (January 5)

Now Appearing

John 1:1-9, 10-18 – “The Word that Reveals”

Epiphany (January 12-February 23)

Matthew 3:13-17 – “A Son Who Pleases”

John 1:29-42 – “A Lamb Who Leads”

Matthew 4:12-23 – “A Preacher Who Calls

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A Son Who Pleases

Matthew 3:13-17

FIT Teaching Guide

by David Woody

This adult teaching outline is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartledge, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

Bible Background

And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."
Matthew 3:17

The questions at the restaurant after church on Sunday are pretty much the same every week. "How was church? Anything special or memorable happen this week?"

Sadly, the answers are also the same: "It was good. No, nothing special. Nothing jumped out at me."

What if, one Sunday, something DID jump out? Like a bushy-haired wild man dressed in burlap dancing and preaching his way down the aisle?! That would be a Sunday worth talking about.

Today, we spend some memorable time with Jesus in the baptismal waters of the Jordan River and the one who baptized him.

Opening

After everyone arrives, ask each person to think of their baptism story. Then, ask each person to share their story, or a part of their story with the rest of the group. If someone has not yet been baptized, respectfully pass them and go on to the next person.

After everyone has shared, ask questions like these:

What did all the stories have in common?

Were all the stories the same? Does that matter?

What was the most important part of each story?

As you talk about baptism with others, what's most important for you to talk about?

Reading the Bible

Where did Jesus come from? (Galilee)

Why did Jesus go to the Jordan river? (so John could baptize him)

What could John have said? (I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?)

How did Jesus answer John? (Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.)

What happened after Jesus when he came out of the water? (suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him.)

What did the voice from heaven say? (This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.)

Making Connections

Who is the most engaging, exciting preacher you've personally heard (not on TV, a podcast, or the radio)? What made that person so memorable? What sermon first comes to mind when you think of this person?

When you think of "dressing for church" what kind of dressing do you expect? What do you think when you see someone dressed less than what you expect at church? What do you think when you see someone dressed more than what you expect at church?

How do you define the word "repent?" What role does that word have in your life?

What does "the kingdom of heaven" mean to you? What does "the kingdom of heaven look like?" What is your responsibility for building "the kingdom of heaven?"

Why do you think churches continue to baptize today? What significance does that ancient ritual hold for modern believers?

Our Lesson Writer says, "Baptists typically assume that Jesus was baptized by immersion, but the text does not describe the mode by which Jesus was baptized." Does it matter if baptism is by full immersion or by another method? Why do you say that?

Does it matter if a believer is baptized by any method? Why do you say that?

When your time here is complete, what words would you like to hear from God? What are you doing to make sure those words get spoken?

So What?

John the Baptist was, without a doubt, one of the more colorful characters in the New Testament. His physical appearance was enough to cause people to pause and take notice. Combine that with his message about Jesus, and folks stopped to pay attention to him.

We all have a message about Jesus to share with the world.

Our Lesson Writer says, “Jesus humbly submitted to John’s baptism, and contemporary believers adopt a position of meekness when following Christ in the baptismal waters. We may not see the Spirit descending in the form of a dove, but the humility we express in baptism is an open invitation for the Spirit’s presence in our lives.”

Ask your group to think about their individual message they have about Jesus. What is the message they have to proclaim?

Give the group time to share their answers. Record their ideas on the board for everyone to see.

Next, ask your group to think about how they can share their individual message. How will you get your message out to the world?

Give the group time to share their answers. Record those answers on the board for everyone to see.

Finally, ask your group to share their thoughts about how to humbly share their message so that others will hear it and be open to receive it.

The Challenge

This week, share your message with at least one person, even if it’s with someone who already knows Jesus and the good news. Get in the habit of sharing Jesus with others.

Prayer

Loving God, thank you for John the Baptist and his willingness to listen to you and live out your call for his life. Work within each one of us, so that we, too, will be open to your calling for our lives. Give us the words. Give us the opportunities. Give us the courage to tell our stories. Amen.

Digging Deeper

by Tony Cartledge

Digging Deeper is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartledge, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. Watch for the “shovel” icon in the THE BIBLE LESSON, and then reference that item in this Digging Deeper resource. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

John the baptizer—I’m aware, as are you, that the more common name for John is “John the Baptist.” I prefer the term “John the baptizer” for two reasons. The first is that the word translates a participle that means “one who baptizes” or “the one baptizing.” The second is that “Baptist” has come to mean something entirely different. It refers to a broadly diverse denomination that (for the most part) believes in practicing baptism by immersion, but “Baptist” means many other things. It’s not appropriate to hang a label on John that implies more than it means.

Although Landmark Baptists contend that the Baptist denomination started with John the Baptist, that is a false and unfortunate view. The John who immersed Jesus was a baptizer, but not a Baptist.

Epiphany—Church tradition holds January 6 as the date of “Epiphany” and the beginning of the season of Epiphany. The word “epiphany” means “appearance” or “manifestation.” Epiphany was originally associated with the visit of the Magi, and celebrates the public manifestation of Christ. The season of Epiphany is observed between the seasons of Easter and Lent in the church year.

Elijah—John’s rugged appearance and rustic dress reminded contemporaries of Elijah because the crusty prophet’s appearance was so distinctive that anyone who had seen him remembered it. King Ahaziah of Israel once injured himself and sent messengers to inquire of the god Baal-Zebub whether he would live. Elijah intercepted the messengers and sent them back with this word: “Is it because there is no God in Israel that you are sending to inquire of Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron? Therefore you shall not leave the bed to which you have gone, but shall surely die.”

When this was reported to Ahaziah, he asked, “What sort of man was he who came to meet you and told you these things?”

The servants answered with a description: “A hairy man, with a leather belt around his waist.”

And the king probably groaned as he said, “It is Elijah the Tishbite.” (2 Kgs. 1:1-8).

Digging Deeper *continued*

Bethany Beyond the Jordan—The

Jordan River has shifted its course over the years, partly due to earthquakes – it runs through the northern part of the Great Rift Valley, which extends into Africa.

The remains of two ancient churches (under modern shelters), along with steps leading down to the former water level, testify to an early belief that this now-dry channel was the place where Jesus was baptized at “Bethany Beyond the Jordan,” and where early pilgrims came to be baptized in the same place.



John’s preaching, and us—John’s language was just as shocking and graphic as his appearance. He used strong words and striking images to explain just how serious the matter of repentance was, especially to those who already considered themselves to be the most religious, the Pharisees and Sadducees (compare Luke 3:7, where the same message is addressed to “the crowds”).

In verses 7-12 John used sharp images, accusing even those Pharisees and Sadducees who came out for baptism of being like snakes squirming away from imminent danger. Being children of Abraham wouldn’t save them, he said: God could raise up children from river rocks. He spoke of an ax slicing into the very roots of those who called themselves God’s people, clearing them away so that those who were truly repentant might take their place. He pictured a farmer’s winnowing fork that throws threshed grain into the air so that the grain may be saved and separated from the worthless chaff, which finds its fate in the farmer’s fire.

John called for change, but many people don’t like change. Herod and his wife did not want change, so they took John’s head off and served it up on a platter. They were happy with the *status quo*. They did not want anyone threatening their security or their self-image.

But, multitudes of others came out to hear John preach, because they were hungry for change, and even John’s fiery preaching was good news because it offered hope.

Few things are harder than change. We get stressed out over change. Changing jobs, changing houses, changing schools, changing churches. Change causes all sorts of alarms to go off in our heads. But the hardest change to make is precisely the one that takes place right there – in our heads – and in our hearts. The hardest change to make is a change in our self-image, a change in the way we think, a change in our personal behavior, a change in our lifestyle.

Digging Deeper *continued*

People cannot begin to change unless they first believe in the possibility of change. This was John's message. Everything about John, from his weird appearance to his shocking sermons, was different. That difference in John symbolized the truth that we can also be different.

Jesus and baptism—Why did Jesus choose to be baptized by his cousin John? John baptized with water, utilizing the power of symbol to indicate the need for sinners to repent and have their sins washed away. Like an Old Testament prophet, John called members of the established religion to account for their failures. The gospels suggest that many people were convicted by his preaching, and they sought John's water baptism as a symbol of cleansing, as a way of declaring their intention to turn away from sin and turn toward God.

Jesus, however, reportedly lived without sin. The Bible (Heb. 4:15) and church tradition insist that Jesus, though tempted as humans are tempted, did not sin. Thus, John's baptism would hardly be necessary. Jesus had no need of liquid lustrations to symbolically wash away sins that did not exist.

Why, then, did he pursue baptism? John himself wondered, insisting that he was more in need of Jesus' baptism than the other way around (Mat. 3:14).

It is often suggested that Jesus chose to be baptized as a way of expressing solidarity with humankind. Although he did not need to be baptized as a symbol of repentance, perhaps Jesus desired to be baptized as a sign of both humility and humanity. As he did not think his divinity was something to be exploited, but "emptied himself" (Phil. 2:6-7), so he did not regard himself as "too good" to be baptized.

Jesus came to his baptism with the recognition that he was Israel's long-expected Messiah. In a way, the act of baptism served as Jesus' public ordination to the ministry that lay ahead. The messiah was to be identified with his people, and Jesus' baptism was a clear mark of identification with humankind.

In submitting to John's baptism, Jesus also endorsed John's work and showed that he was not in competition with him. John's call for repentance was appropriate. Jesus brought an entirely new dimension to the gospel, but repentance would remain important. Jesus began his preaching ministry by calling on others to repent and believe the gospel (Mk. 1:15).

The most important reason Jesus chose to be baptized, however, may be found in his own words. When John objected, Jesus said "Let it be so now; for it is proper for *us* in this way to fulfill all righteousness" (Mat. 3:15). "To fulfill all righteousness" means, ultimately, to do God's will. Jesus believed it was the will of God for him to experience baptism, and it was the will of God for John to perform the ceremony. "It is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Jesus not only submitted to God in his own life, but challenged John to do likewise, even though the desert preacher might not have understood why it was necessary.

Digging Deeper *continued*

Doves and pigeons—The word translated as “dove” was also used to describe the common pigeon, but translators have uniformly preferred to speak of a dove. An old joke asks: “Do you know the difference between doves and pigeons?”

“Doves have a better agent.”

Surprise!—I still recall an observation Frank Stagg made 50 years ago, when he observed that the appearance of the Spirit as a dove may have been a surprising revelation to John. John’s proclamation about Jesus was laced with terms of judgment: the ax was at the root of the tree, and the winnowing fork was prepared to sort the wheat and the chaff. John predicted that Jesus would baptize with the Spirit and with fire (Mat. 3:14-15).

The Spirit, however, appeared in the form of a dove, a symbol of peace. Judgment would come, but not before mercy. Jesus would call others to repentance, but his ministry would be marked primarily by acts of compassion and mercy (“Matthew,” in the *Broadman Bible Commentary*, Vol. 8 [Nashville: Broadman Press, 1969], p. 95).

The Hardest Question

by Tony Cartledge

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Was Jesus immersed?

Paintings of Jesus' baptism rarely show Jesus beneath the water or even dripping wet, but many people – especially Baptists – assume that John dipped Jesus beneath the water and brought him up in the manner common to their tradition. Most Baptists lean the candidate backward into the water during the rite, though I have known some who push the candidate face down into the water (which is easier, though lacking a bit in symbolism). Orthodox Catholics who come to the Jordan River for baptism dip themselves three times by simply squatting down into the water, with or without the help of the priest's hand on their heads. But how strong is the evidence that Jesus was immersed?

The first part of v. 16 (along with the parallel in Mk. 1:10) provides one of several texts often cited as arguments for baptism by immersion: "And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water ..." Baptists have traditionally interpreted the phrase as an indication that Jesus' body had been completely under the water, and that the Spirit of God descended like a dove just as John brought him up out of the water.

Grammatically, however, "as he came up from the water" could also describe the action of Jesus walking out of the water and onto the shore. Indeed, that is the most natural meaning. The Greek verb translated "came up" normally carries the sense of walking or climbing, as in going up a hill or going up to a certain place. The preposition *apo*, translated "from," also suggests the idea of "away from" rather than "up from" or "out of." That meaning is best conveyed by the preposition *ek*, which is used in Mark 1:10. It can mean "out of" or "out from."

The point of this discussion is not to argue that Jesus was not immersed, but simply to point out that the text does not demand that interpretation. The Greek verb could be used in a literal sense to mean "dip" or "immerse," or in a more figurative sense to describe a religious ritual or initiation. It is quite possible that John invited persons to come and stand in the river while he scooped up handfuls of water and poured it over their heads. But, baptism by pouring or sprinkling could have been done almost anywhere. The fact that John characteristically baptized in the river suggests the need for more (or deeper) water, which implies that he practiced immersion. Likewise, Paul's later analogy of baptism to the act of burial and resurrection best fits with the act of immersion (Rom. 6:3-5, Col. 2:12).

Jews of the day commonly practiced self-immersion in special pools (not unlike baptismal pools) as a purification rite before worship. Although John's baptism symbolized spiritual repentance rather than ritual purity, his hearers were accustomed to the idea of dipping themselves in water.

The Hardest Question *continued*

Some years back, archaeologists excavated the remnants of a small cave that had been incorporated into an early church. The cave contained symbols associated with John and with baptism. It is located near the possible site of “Bethany beyond the Jordan,” which John 1:28 cites as the place where John was baptizing. Early Christians believed that had John lived in the cave at some point, and converted it to a chapel or memorial to him. A later monastery built at the site contained two apparent baptismal pools.