

THE BAPTISM OF JESUS

by Carol Duerksen

KEY VERSE:

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came upon heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased."

Luke 3:21-22

FAITH STORY:

Luke 3:1-22

FAITH FOCUS:

John the Baptist has made the scene, getting the people all riled up, turning them on their heels and calling them to repentance. His listeners begin to wonder if he might be the Messiah, and he responds saying that while he baptizes them with water, someone is coming who will baptize with the Holy Spirit. And then one day Jesus himself shows up, asking to be baptized by John. John's immediate response is "No way—I need to be baptized by you!" But Jesus insists, and John baptizes Jesus. As Jesus emerges from the water, the heavens open up, the Spirit descends like a dove and alights on Jesus. A voice from heaven declares: "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

SESSION GOAL:

To help students understand why Jesus was baptized, and how that relates to the reason people are baptized today.

SESSION OBJECTIVES:

By the end of this session, the students will:

- process the differences and the similarities between the baptism of Jesus and the baptisms of people today.
- contemplate their own faith journey in terms of baptism

MATERIALS NEEDED AND ADVANCE PREPARATION:

- 1 Bring to class the items used in your congregation for a baptism.
- 2 Paper and pencils
- 3 Music for "As I went down to the river to pray." This could be a CD and CD player or the music score to sing. It's found in "Sing for the Journey" #79.
- 4 Candle

SESSION OUTLINE

FOCUS: (5–10 minutes)

Seat students in a circle and pass around the items used in a baptism. Don't introduce the items or say anything about them. Ask students to say a word or two that comes to mind as they hold the items. After the items have been around the circle once, (and the word baptism was probably used a lot), send the items around again, asking students to come up with new words. New rule: they can't repeat any word that has already been used. How many new thoughts can they come up with related to baptism?

CONNECT: (5 minutes)

Discuss: *Why do you think people get baptized? Have you been baptized? Why or why not? Who was the first person ever to be baptized?*

EXPLORE THE BIBLE: (15 minutes)

Ask for a volunteer to read the passage, and instruct students to listen for answers to the following: Why was John baptizing people? What did he want them to do? Why did Jesus get baptized?

Share a mini-lecture with students based on these points:

- John was proclaiming "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."
- John warned people not to count on their heritage for salvation.
- Equally important to being baptized were the actions that John called for: people were to share their material possessions and financial resources. John's message was a call to economic repentance as well as spiritual forgiveness of sins.
- People thought that John might be the Messiah but he quickly told them he wasn't, and that while he baptized with water, Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit.
- Jesus came to John to be baptized (this is written in more detail in the other Gospels) and John didn't want to do it but Jesus insisted.
- Jesus said it needed to be done "to fulfill all righteousness" (Matt. 3:15), but what does that mean? Why was Jesus baptized? Scholars offer several suggestions, and perhaps they are all true: 1) Jesus was renouncing his sheltered life of home and consecrating himself to the dangerous mission to which he felt called. He was "taking up his cross." 2) In being baptized, Jesus took upon himself the sin of humanity, and it was then up to him to "fulfill all righteousness." 3) Jesus was being commissioned by God for his ministry and his destiny on earth.

God's voice of approval and commission came to Jesus in the words "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased."

APPLY: (15–20 minutes)

Hand out paper and pencils to students. Ask them to draw a timeline of their lives, with their birth on one end and their death on the other end. Ask them to mark significant spiritual events on their time line. This could include when they were consecrated in church, when

they started going to Sunday school, times when they remember feeling close to God, etc. Ask them also to mark on the time line where their baptism (did or could) occur.

Then ask students to write their reflections on the following question: What difference does baptism make in your life? Compare it to what John says in Luke 3:7-14. Does any of that apply to you? Does baptism reach beyond that moment into the rest of your life?

Invite students to share their timelines and their reflections. Allow them to pass if they so desire.

Sing the song "As I went down to the river to pray." After the song, ask students how many of them think of a baptism when they sing this song. Then ask why? Baptism isn't even mentioned...only the word "pray." People are going to the river to pray—that's what the song says. Push students until someone says (or you suggest) the reason this song is connected to a baptism—it's because the movie "O Brother Where Are Thou?" used this song during a baptism scene. Certainly it is a powerful and appropriate song for a baptism, but was it being used that way before the movie came out? This illustrates the power of the media, and also the power of symbols—this song has become a symbol of baptism for some people. Baptism itself is a symbol—an outward symbol of an internal change of our hearts and our lives and a new commitment to Jesus.

RESPOND: (15 minutes)

Invite students to repeat each line as you lead them in the following response:

Refreshing God,

(repeat)

For every stream and spring

(repeat)

that wells up grace from deep within your love,

(repeat)

I give my free and heartfelt thanks.

(repeat)

Today I draw forth rejoicing

(repeat)

the water of trust and comfort from deep within your wells.

(repeat)

May all people hear my thanks to you resound in song

(repeat)

May I hear my own voice glad with laughter

(repeat)

praise you for the gift of baptism into your kingdom

(repeat)

for I would be so lost, so lost,

(repeat)

and I desire to be found by you.

(repeat)

(adapted from Sing for the Journey #168)

Light the candle, turn lights off, play or sing the song again, and encourage students to spend some moments in contemplation and prayer. Close the class with a prayer.

INSIGHTS FROM SCRIPTURE:

We do not have the words and thoughts of Jesus himself recorded prior to the beginning of his ministry, but we can surely assume that as he grew up and matured physically, emotionally and spiritually in his years at Nazareth, he experienced a deepening awareness that God had for him a unique and daunting task. The humanity of Christ must have processed this internal information over and over, even as the divinity of Christ knew his mission and his destiny. We can only guess how it felt to know he would be walking a path alone and like none other in human history. Perhaps he was finally sure, as he went to be baptized, that the soul-shaking moment was at hand. And then, he hears God's voice, "My son, the beloved." How incredibly personal and powerful!

Prisoners of the world's transgressions cannot be released except by One who comes from beyond that world. Persons cannot be led from the darkness of sin into light except by one who has lived in the light. This person—this Jesus, Son of God—was that One, but he had to take on human form and share the dark hopelessness of the world in order to lead people out of it. It was this task, utter and alone, a three year journey between heaven and earth—to which Christ was ordained at his baptism.

The task is hugely different, yet soberingly similar for those being baptized today. We are not the Son of God, but we are the children of God. We are not both human and divine, yet we have the divine residing in our humanity. We are not without sin—we are broken vessels. But in a very real sense, we are walking the tightrope between heaven and earth—seeking to bring the Kingdom of God to this earth, striving to invite the people of this earth to the heavenly Kingdom.

WORKS CITED:

The Interpreter's Bible, Matthew and Mark; Abingdon Press, 1951.