

# Adult Teaching Resources

January 10, 2016



A Good Way to Begin — Psalm 147:12-20

## Jesus: The Curtain Rises

**Of Water and Fire — Luke 3:15-22 (RCL 3:15-17, 21-22)**

Of Water and Wine — John 2:1-11

An Old Scroll and a New Mission — Luke 4:14-21

A New Prophet and an Old Response — Luke 4:21-30

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# Of Water and Fire

Luke 3:15-22

## FIT Teaching Guide

by Rick Jordan

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

**Before the Lesson:** Print the handout, “Reflections on the Waters of Baptism,” for the Transformational Exercise. Prepare a recording of the sound of water or bring in a small fountain for water sounds as class members reflect and write for the Transformational Exercise.

## Fellowship Question

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Use *one* of the following to break the ice, to begin discussion, and lead into the study:

If you’ve been baptized, where were you baptized? (If multiple times, where were those places?)

What is one thing you remember (if you do remember) about your baptism?

## Information

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Q. What do John the Baptist and Winnie the Pooh and Kermit the Frog have in common?

A. Their middle name.

John’s middle name was not really “the.” And his last name was not “Baptist.” But he became known for his fiery preaching that led many persons to be baptized in the Jordan River. What he did become how he was identified. And, by being baptized by John, people identified themselves with John and his message.

John did not “invent” baptism. As THE BIBLE LESSON writer notes: “First century Jews were accustomed to dipping themselves in water as a purification measure after becoming ritually unclean through contact with blood or other reasons. ...They typically dipped themselves in a small pool called a *mikveh* (plural *mikva’ot*).”

The pools “had to contain enough water from a natural source for an average-sized person to immerse completely... The pools were so common in ancient Israel that archeologists use the presence of *mikva’ot* to identify whether sites from the first few centuries were populated by Jews.” (From the online resource, Digging Deeper, “Baptism.”)

However, John is not concerned about ritual purity.

[Have a class member read John 3:3, 7-14.]

## Information *continued*

John is not concerned about ritual purity. What does concern him? (That the wrath of God is coming. That people live more moral lives. That individuals see faith as intersecting with their real, daily lives. Repentance and changed character. Etc.)

“John’s prophetic message was a simple one. God was angry with his people and he planned to punish them...A prophecy is not a prediction, it is a warning or a promise. The prophet warns Israel about God’s judgement and promises God’s salvation. Both the warning and the promise are conditional...John expected each individual in Israel to repent and experience a personal change of heart. This is surely the fundamental meaning of John’s practice of baptism. It does not matter what precedents there might be for the rite itself. What matters is the use John made of it. “They confessed their sins” and were then baptized (Mark 1:5).” (Albert Nolan. *Jesus Before Christianity*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis. 1976. p. 15, 16)

How would you have felt about this prophet and his teaching?

John insisted on a personal faith that shaped an individual’s character and behavior. How does that compare with what our church teaches about the spiritual life?

Three groups of people come up to John in this passage. What are the fruits of spiritual repentance, according to John? (spiritual repentance is reflected in our attitudes and actions with our money and “stuff”; generosity and honesty are truer signs of faith than practicing religious rituals, etc.)

John does not measure a person’s spiritual repentance by our typical yardsticks of “commitment” — attendance at church, service through the church, giving money to the church. How does our church (tacitly or explicitly) measure “commitment”?

What do you think John would say about these standards of spirituality?

The people were moved by John. He had the Truth. He knew God’s heart.

[Have a class member read Luke 3:15-18.]

The Jews’ perspective of the coming Messiah was that of a powerful military leader. Where do we see this kind of imagery in John’s preaching about the one to come after him?

In verse 18, Luke calls this “good news.” How is John’s preaching “good news”?

In the crowd stood Jesus, John’s cousin. We have not seen Jesus in about 20 years. We are not told in any of our gospels what Jesus did in those intervening years. Did he work as a carpenter, following in Joseph’s footsteps? Did he study to become a rabbi? Did he join a “separatist” group, such as the Essenes? All of that will forever be a mystery to us. What was he like? What were his thoughts about the Roman occupation? What were the faith struggles he had with the contemporary Jewish faith? We are not told.

However, “If we could find an historically certain incident in which Jesus made a choice between two or more alternatives, we should have a very important clue to the direction of his thinking. This we have at the beginning of all the gospels. Jesus chose to be baptized by John.” (Nolan, 11.)

## Information *continued*

Have you ever thought about that? Jesus was making a public choice, a public statement, an endorsement of John's teachings. How is that like what our church teaches about baptism?

“John the Baptist was the only man in that society who impressed Jesus. Here was the voice of God warning his people of an impending disaster and calling for a change of heart in each and every individual. Jesus believed this and joined in with those who were determined to do something about it. He was baptized by John. Jesus may not have agreed with John in every detail. Later, he certainly came to differ somewhat from John. But the very fact of his baptism by John is conclusive proof of his acceptance of John's basic prophecy: Israel is headed for unprecedented catastrophe. And in choosing to believe this prophecy, Jesus immediately shows himself to be in basic disagreement with all those who reject John and his baptism: the Zealots, Pharisees, Essenes, Sadducees, scribes and apocalyptic writers.” (Nolan, 17.)

Jesus listened to John's preaching and that “good news” resonated within him. Jesus was discovering his call. He would preach and teach, but it would not be in the traditional manner. John's theology and manner shaped Jesus' public ministry.

John's preaching eventually would get him into trouble with religious leaders and with political leaders.

[Have a class member read Luke 3:19-20.]

This happened well after the baptismal setting of today's passage. But it serves as a reminder that being prophetic has its price. If Jesus followed in John's footsteps, he would have to discover that, too.

[Have a class member read Luke 3:21-22.]

Jesus is baptized. He prays. A dove descends. And there is a voice. God speaks.

Although we call the Bible, “God's Word,” there are not many of direct quotes from God in the Bible. But here, there is no doubt that this voice is God's. What does God say?

God calls Jesus “my son, whom I love.” God does not label Jesus as Messiah or Savior or Lord. That might have been what the onlookers would have expected — maybe even what John would have expected. What does this mean, for God to label Jesus as “my son”?

In his baptism, Jesus makes a choice. That choice is affirmed by the Father. The Spirit of God is present, represented by a dove. Here we have an early illustration of the Trinity, the community of God celebrating the public revealing of God's love for this Son and also all of God's children.

In the Church Year, we celebrate Epiphany today. Epiphany is “a Christian festival held on Jan 6, commemorating, in the Western Church, the manifestation of Christ to the Magi and, in the Eastern Church, the baptism of Christ.” [epiphany. Dictionary.com. *Collins English Dictionary — Complete & Unabridged* 10th Edition. HarperCollins Publishers. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/epiphany> (accessed: November 25, 2015).]

How do these two stories reveal to us who Jesus is?

## Transformational Exercise

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In his baptism, Jesus took his stand with John. In our baptism, we take our stand with Jesus.

[Distribute handouts. Play sounds of water.]

In the next moments of silence, consider these two quotations. Jot down your reflections on what Anne Lamott and Eugene Peterson say about baptism.

[After time for reflection and writing, close in a prayer something like this: *God, we thank you for the gift of baptism. It reminds us of who we are and whose we are. Amen.*]

**Comments or Questions for Rick Jordan?** You may send comments to the lesson plan author at [rjordan@cbfnc.org](mailto:rjordan@cbfnc.org). Rick is also available to lead workshops and conferences on Christian Education, with particular emphasis on how best to use the FIT Faith model.

## Digging Deeper

by Tony Cartlege

Digging Deeper is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartlege, printed in *Baptists Today*. 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 *Baptists Today* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Baptists Today* so they can prepare before the lesson.



A mikveh from the Herodian, first century BCE.

**Baptism** — *Mikva'ot*, pools specially built for Jewish purification rituals, had to contain enough water from a natural source for an average-sized person to immerse completely, and there could be no visible detritus floating in the water. The pools were so common in ancient Israel that archaeologists use the presence of *mikva'ot* to identify whether sites from the first few centuries were populated by Jews.

**The Messiah** — John’s announcement about the coming Messiah in vv. 15-16 has parallels in all the other gospels, including John (Mark 1:7-8; Matt. 3:11-12; John 1:26-27). There could be no bigger news for Jews who had been long oppressed and anxious for the Messiah’s arrival. The prophet Nathan had promised David that one of his descendants would always rule over Israel (2 Samuel 7), and other Old Testament texts built upon this hope (Jer. 30:9; Ezek. 37:23-24). Documents from Qumran and excerpts from the apocryphal Psalms of

Solomon (chs 17-18) reveal a growing level of expectation that God would send a new Davidic Messiah to redeem Israel.

**Burning fire** — The “unquenchable” nature of the fire John mentioned in v. 17 may be intended as a reference to an intense flame that leads to complete combustion, or it may be a subtle reference to the popular belief in perpetual fires of judgment symbolized by the constantly smoking garbage dump in the Valley of Hinnom (Matt. 18:8; 25:41; Mark 9:43-48).

**John’s preaching** — In his commentary on Luke, Alan Culpepper notes that John’s preaching embodied prophetic, social, and confessional elements. He observes that many churches emphasize one or two of those elements and ignore the other(s). Does your church focus on prophetic evangelism, social ministry, confessional praise, or some combination? Culpepper asks: “Is it desirable for the church today to embody all three strands of John’s preaching? If so, how can this be done?” (“Luke” in *The New Interpreters Bible*, Vol. 9 [Abingdon Press, 1996], 86-87).

**Messy and messier** — Luke identifies Herod as “Herod the tetrarch” in order to distinguish him from his infamous father, commonly known as Herod the Great, the same paranoid Herod who had ordered the slaying of the infants in Bethlehem. Herod the Great was not

## Digging Deeper *continued*

above killing his own children, including some of his sons, born to him by several wives. After his death, the Romans divided his territory between the three sons he didn't kill. Herod Antipas inherited Judea, the southern part of the country that included Jerusalem. Herod Philip was given control of an area in northern Galilee, where he built the city of Caesarea Philippi, to honor both the emperor and himself. Herod Archelaus was given another area, which he ruled so ineptly that the Romans had to replace him.

Herod Antipas was married to a princess from Nabatea, a small kingdom located in southeast of the Dead Sea, known mainly from its impressive fortress city of Petra. Herod Philip was married to a woman named Herodias, who was the daughter of his own half-brother Aristobulus, who had been executed by his father.

When Herod Antipas divorced his Nabatean wife to marry his niece, the wife of his half-brother (who flaunted custom by taking the initiative in divorcing Herod Philip), is it any wonder that John would find fault with the marriage and the poor example the nation's Jewish-in-name-only leaders were setting?

**The wings of a dove** — I grew up in the same neighborhood with “The Lewis Family,” a singing clan of bluegrass gospel artists whose popularity stretched over half a century and only faded when they started dying off.

When I was a boy, their signature song recalled Jesus' baptism. Perhaps you remember the chorus:

On the wings of a snow white dove,  
He sends his pure, sweet love,  
A sign from above,  
On the wings of a dove.

If you don't know the tune, you can listen to it here:

<https://bop.fm/s/the-lewis-family/wings-of-a-dove>

**What did God say?** — Most English translations of the Bible quote God's testimony in v. 22 as “You are my beloved son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” The saying recalls Psalm 2, a coronation psalm that portrays Israel's king as being adopted, after a sort, as God's son, ruling in God's behalf: “*I will tell of the decree of the LORD: he said to me, ‘You are my son; today I have begotten you’*” (Ps. 2:7).

This is the reading in the oldest and best manuscripts we have, but one early Greek and the writings of some second century church fathers, record a text that follows Ps. 2:7 exactly: “You are my son; today I have begotten you.”

While the manuscript evidence clearly favors the more common translation, it's hard to imagine why anyone would have changed it from “in whom I am well pleased” to “today I have begotten you,” unless an ancient scribe making a hand-written copy was singing Psalm 2 in his head, and accidentally made the change.

## Digging Deeper *continued*

Even though manuscript evidence is lacking, some scholars argue that the more difficult text, “today I have begotten you,” may have been original, with Luke’s intention being mainly to show God’s public endorsement of Jesus. As the early church struggled to understand the relationship between God the Father and Jesus the Son, however, some Christians developed a view called “Adoptionism,” arguing that Jesus was not the eternal Son who was incarnated on earth, but an ordinary human whom God had adopted to serve God’s purpose. This view came to be regarded as a heresy, so it’s more understandable to imagine why early scribes might have changed “today I have begotten” you” in order to reduce any scriptural support the Adoptionists might have claimed.

## The Hardest Question

by Tony Cartlege

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### Why did Luke omit a specific reference to John baptizing Jesus?

John's positioning of vv. 19-20 is curious, because he declares that Herod had locked John in prison before describing Jesus' baptism, and then omits any reference to John actually performing Jesus' the ritual. This does not deny that John baptized Jesus, but it does serve to diminish John's role.

Why would he do this? Luke has previously given plenty of attention to John, narrating the announcement of his birth to Zechariah, his actual birth, his early ministry, and the basic content of his preaching. John has been on a roughly parallel course with Jesus, serving as his forerunner. Why scale back now?

Richard B. Vincent suggests a couple of possibilities. Although John announced Jesus as the Messiah, he did not become a disciple of Jesus, but continued his own popular preaching ministry until Herod imprisoned him. At the time Luke was writing his gospel, there were still people who had been disciples of John the Baptist, but had not become followers of Jesus. In Acts 19:1-7, for example (also written by Luke), we read of Paul's encounter with 12 "disciples" in Ephesus who had been baptized by John's baptism, and didn't know about Jesus or the Spirit. Paul taught them about Jesus and baptized them in Jesus' name, whereupon they received the Spirit and began to prophesy. We assume there would have been other circles of believers who followed John but didn't know about Jesus.

Luke wanted to portray John's disciples as joining forces with Jesus' followers rather than maintaining a separate status or appearing as competitors to the church. "So," Vinson writes, "perhaps Luke removes John's name and active participation from Jesus' baptism in order to make the story less about Jesus submitting to John and more about God affirming Jesus."

A second reason, Vincent suggests, is that Luke wanted to point to Jesus as a model for believers to follow. As presented in Luke 3:21, Jesus is praying and waiting his turn with others who had come for baptism. Along with his baptism, Jesus prayed and fasted and was tempted and called on the scriptures to help him overcome temptation, thus becoming a paradigm for others to follow.

Likewise, Luke's portrayal has the dove appearing and the voice from heaven being heard not just by Jesus but by the other believers who were there. They would have learned that Jesus was the Son of God — a title that Luke uses sparingly. For more on this, see Richard B. Vinson, *Luke*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Smyth & Helwys, 2008), 103-104.

## *Reflections on the Waters of Baptism*

“Christianity is *about* water. ‘Everyone who thirsteth, come ye to the waters.’ It’s about baptism... It’s about full immersion, about falling into something elemental and wet. Most of what we do in worldly life is geared toward our staying dry, looking good, not going under. But in baptism, in lakes and rains and tanks and fonts, you agree to do something that’s a little sloppy because at the same time it’s also holy, and absurd. It’s about surrender, giving into all those things we can’t control: it’s a willingness to let go of balance and decorum and get *drenched*.”

How does your stand with Jesus relate to Lamott’s words?

“Baptism is at one and the same time death and resurrection, a renunciation and an embrace.”

How does your stand with Jesus relate to Peterson’s words?

Sources:

Anne Lamott. *Traveling Mercies*. NY: Pantheon. 1999. p. 231.

Eugene H. Peterson. *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: A Conversation in Spiritual Theology*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans. 2005. p. 303.