



STORIES **AND** RITUALS

LESSON 18

Stories & Rituals: The Bible in Broad Strokes

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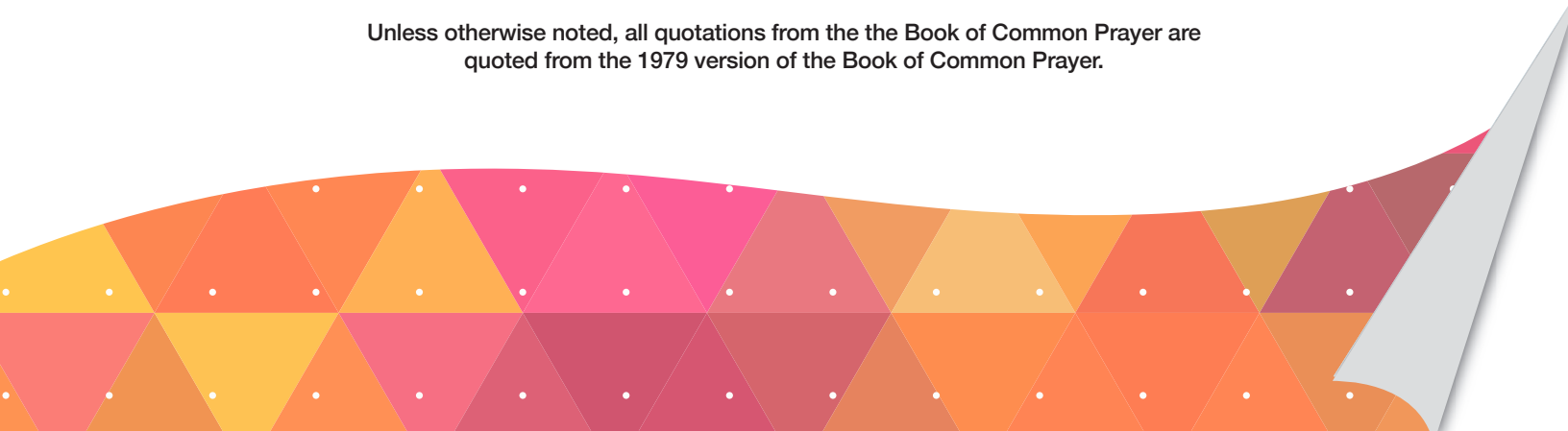
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John Baptizes Crowds

Texts: Luke 3:1-22

Big Idea: We prepare the way for God's coming.

Lesson Objectives

Participants will:

1. Recognize that we encounter obstacles that separate us from God by playing a game.
2. Identify that there is work that is still needed to prepare for God's coming by hearing a story about John the Baptist.
3. Demonstrate an understanding of the personal action needed for this preparation by participating in a prayer ritual.

ACTIVITY (TIME)

Dive In (10 minutes)
Group Check-In

Community Builder (15 minutes)
A-maze-ing!

The Story (15 minutes)
John Baptizes Crowds

The Ritual (15 minutes)
Prepare the Way

Dig Deeper (10 minutes)
Descending Doves

Wrap it Up (5 minutes)
Closing Prayer

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Nothing

- Objects to create an obstacle course

- Copy of Lesson Sheet 18.1

- Soft, instrumental music (optional)
- Method for playing music (optional)
- Washable markers • Pens or pencils
- Soap • Large bowl of water
- Paper or cloth towels • Slips of paper

- Bible • Copies of instructions
- Origami paper or 8" squares of white paper
- String • Scissors
- Paperclips or tape (optional)

- Nothing

LESSON OVERVIEW



What's the Story?

This story is sometimes read during the Advent season. In this story, John teaches people that someone greater than he is coming and that the time to prepare for this coming is now. He advises people with two articles of clothing to share with those that have none. To the tax collectors, he says to collect only money that is required, and nothing more. To the soldiers, he says not to accuse people falsely or extort money from them. In this story, people are told to "Prepare ye the way of the Lord!"

The story ends with Jesus emerging from the crowd and presenting himself to be baptized. As John prays over Jesus, the heavens open and the Holy Spirit descends in the form of a dove, and a voice coming from heaven says, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." (Luke 3:22)

John begins this story by preaching that God is coming, and people should be ready. Then, Jesus appears, is baptized, and begins his ministry. God comes to live among people. Even today, thousands of years after Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension, we know that God will once again return to dwell with us and bring God's kingdom to earth.



What's the "Big Idea?"

Today's lesson focuses on the big idea that *we prepare the way for God's coming*. There is work to be done before we can open our lives to Christ. We cannot lead selfish, self-centered lives and be Jesus people at the same time! We must turn from the ways of the world (those thoughts and practices that lead us away from the Lord), and turn toward Jesus by inviting him into our daily lives.



What's the Symbol?

Water is an important part of today's story. Fill a large bowl with some water. You may wish to include river rocks or stones, tree branches, or other natural elements. If possible, include some pieces of tree fruit (apples, citrus, etc.) as another symbol of the story.



What's the Ritual?

Today's ritual will invite participants to think about what they need to do to prepare for the Lord's coming. In small groups, participants will reflect on the things in their own life that block them for God, and identify one thing they can do to help prepare the way for God. Then, they choose one of these things, and with a washable marker, write it on the palm of their hand. Then, they "wash" the obstacle off using a large bowl of water.



Setting Up Your Space

Set up your "altar" area. Cover a table with fabric or linen. In the middle of the table, place a large bowl of water with a towel under it to protect the cloth from drips. Have some soap and paper towels under the table for use during the ritual. If desired, surround the bowl with rocks or other natural elements. If you are using the Community Builder activity, set up the maze.

DIVE IN (10 MINUTES)

Group Check-In

Materials:

- Nothing

During the session:

- Open your session with a quick prayer. Use this one or a prayer of your own:
Holy Lord, open our eyes, ears, and hearts to see your love and faithfulness in the world around us. Help us see your love for us in your Word. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.
- **Let's start our time together by sharing some of the great and not-so-great things that have happened to us this week. What were the high points and low points of your week?** Go around the group and invite everyone to share.

COMMUNITY BUILDER (15 MINUTES)

A-maze-ing!

Materials:

- Objects to create an obstacle course

Before the session:

- Gather some objects that can be used to create an obstacle course. Chairs, pillows, or other free-standing objects work well. If you have a large group, you may wish to use human bodies to create the maze!

During the session:

- Invite one participant to leave the playing space.
- Give your group 1-3 minutes to create a maze by using the objects in the room. The maze can be as simple or creative as they want. The only rule is that there must be a clear beginning point and a clear end point.
- **Note:** participants can be instructed to hold hand, etc.
- The volunteer that has been away from the playing space re-enters with their eyes closed and is invited to find their way through the maze.
- Once the participant finishes the maze, invite a new person to leave the room. Instruct the group to create a new maze, and invite the participant back to find their way through the maze.

COMMUNITY BUILDER - CONTINUED

- Continue playing the game until either everyone has successfully completed the maze, or you have run out of time.
- Note: participants can be instructed to hold hand, etc.
- After playing the game, ask participants the following questions:

Was it easy or hard for you to navigate through the obstacles in the maze? Why? *[Answers will vary. Accept all answers.]*

What are some obstacles in our lives that block us from God? *[Answers will vary, but may include: not following God's commandments, not loving others, jealousy, fear, etc.]*

- **Are there things we can do together to support one another in being followers of Jesus?** *[Answers will vary, but may include: praying for each other, worshipping together, participating in Bible study together, etc.]*



THE STORY

(15 MINUTES)

John Baptizes Crowds

Materials:

- Copy of Lesson Sheet 18.1

Before the session:

- Make a copy of Lesson Sheet 18.1
- Practice reading through the story several times so you are familiar with it.

During the session:

- Tell the story on Lesson Sheet 18.1.

Ask the following questions:

- **What is this story telling us about God?** *[Answers will vary, but may include: God wants to be active in our lives; God is coming in to the world, etc.]*
- **What is this story telling us about humanity?** *[Answers will vary, but may include: There is work to be done to get ready; people do things that block God from entering their lives; we need to make a choice to “turn back” to God, etc.]*
- **What is this story telling us about the world?** *[Answers will vary, but may include: We live in a broken world; there is work to be done to prepare the way for the coming of the Lord, etc.]*

THE RITUAL (15 MINUTES)

Prepare the Way

Materials:

- Soft, instrumental music (*optional*)
- Method for playing music (*optional*)
- Washable markers
- Slips of paper
- Pens or pencils
- A large bowl of water
- Soap
- Paper or cloth towels

During the session:

- **In today's story, John preaches about getting rid of unfruitful trees and tells people what they can do to be ready for the Lord's coming.**
- Divide participants in to small groups of three or four each.
- Distribute scrap paper and pens or pencils to each participant. Invite them to draw a line down the middle of the paper. Label one column "Blocking" and the other column "Preparing."
- **What are some things in your own life that block you from God? List these things under the "Blocking" column on your paper. Give participants a chance to write.**
- **What are some ways that you are preparing the way for God to be in your life and in the world? List these things under the "Preparing" column on your paper.** Invite participants to share what they wrote on their paper with their small groups. After they finish sharing, ask participants to pick one thing from the "Blocking" column that they think is the biggest thing blocking them from God.
- Hand out washable markers to the group. Invite participants to use the markers to write on the palm of one hand the thing that they circled.
- **There are many things that block us from God. However, John's message invites us to wash away these things and prepare our hearts for God's coming on earth. As Christians, we believe that God's kingdom will one day return to earth. As we wait for this kingdom's coming, we do our best to prepare our hearts for the way of the Lord.**
- Invite participants to take turns approaching the bowl of water in order to "wash" the obstacle off their hand.
- After everyone has washed their hands, invite participants stand in a circle around the worship space or altar.
- **John was in the world to prepare the way for the Lord. Likewise we too, as followers of Jesus, must continue to prepare the way for the Lord.**
- **Preparing the way of the Lord requires personal action on our part!**
- **What are some ways that you can prepare your heart for the coming of the Lord?** [Answers will vary. Accept all answers.]

DIG DEEPER (10 MINUTES)

Descending Doves

Materials:

- Bible • Copy of instructions for each participant • Scissors • String • Paper clips or tape (optional)
- Origami paper or white copy paper cut into 8"x8" squares

Before the session:

- Make a copy of the instructions for each participant. You can find instructions for making origami doves at: <http://www.origamiway.com/origami-dove.shtml>
- Make a sample dove.

During the session:

- Read Luke 3:22 aloud to the group.
- **Many people see a dove as a symbol of peace. God's coming brings peace and hope to humanity. Let's make some doves as a reminder of God's peace that comes to us.** Hand each participant an instruction sheet and paper.
- Walk participants through making a dove. Provide guidance as needed.
- Cut string in various lengths and attach them to the top of each dove.
- If possible, use paper clips or tape to hang your doves in a place where your whole church community can see them.
- You may wish to put a notice in your church bulletin (or other communication outlet) about the doves, explaining that they are symbols of God's peace descending as a sign to us, and reminding the community that your youth are "preparing" the way for the Lord's coming in to the life of your community.

WRAP IT UP (5 MINUTES)

Closing Prayer

Invite participants to share any prayer concerns or requests they may have for the week. If you completed the Dig Deeper activity, ask the group to stand under the hanging doves and join hands. Invite each participant to share a word that summarizes what they have learned, discovered, or experienced.

Close with a prayer. Use the following, or your own: **God of peace, you sent messengers like John to help us prepare the way for your coming. Give us the grace to prepare our hearts for your return to earth. We ask this through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.**

Lesson Sheet 18.1

John Baptizes Crowds

A story from the Gospel according to Luke:

Pontius Pilate was Governor of Judea when John the Baptist went all around the countryside of Jordan, preaching words of repentance for the forgiveness of sins and baptizing people. Using the words of Isaiah the prophet, he said:

“A voice of one calling in the desert,
‘Prepare the way for the Lord,
 make straight paths for him.
Every valley shall be filled in,
 Every mountain and hill made low.
The crooked roads shall become straight,
 the rough ways smooth.
And all mankind will see God’s salvation.”

John was a tough act to take, but crowds of people followed him. Think of him as a biblical rock star! He came across pretty harsh at times, saying things like, “You brood of VIPERS!” He said people who did not turn away from their wicked ways were a lot like trees that don’t produce good fruit. Farmers take an ax to the base of trees that don’t produce fruit and cut them down and toss them in to a fire to be burned. That’s pretty scary language and the crowds asked him what they could do to prepare. He told them if they owned two shirts, they should give one to someone who had none. Tax collectors wanted to know what they should do, and he told them to not ask for more than was required to pay. Soldiers asked what they should do and he told them not to take money from people or accuse someone falsely.

People began to think that John was the Christ, but he assured them that he would not be worthy to untie the sandals of the one who was coming! He said he baptized them with water, but the one who was coming would baptize them with the Holy Spirit and with fire! John got in trouble a lot for the things he was saying. When we spread the good news about Jesus, we must risk rejection and being judged or looked down upon. But nothing stopped John, not even being thrown in to jail by Herod.

One day when all the people were being baptized, Jesus emerged from the crowd and presented himself to John. As Jesus was praying, heaven opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”