

Gen. 1:1–5

Ps. 29

Acts 19:1–7

Mark 1:4–11

Baptism as a New Beginning

Goal for the Session Adults will compare Jesus' baptism as described in Mark with their own and articulate its significance in their lives.

■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on Mark 1:4–11

WHAT is important to know?

— From "Exegetical Perspective," Leslie J. Hoppe

Mark wishes his readers to know who Jesus really is from the very beginning of his story of Jesus' ministry and death. The characters in Mark's story will come to such knowledge only gradually. The climax of Mark's Gospel comes with the confession of the centurion on Golgotha: "Truly, this man was God's Son" (Mark 15:39). Ironically, it was the death of Jesus that revealed his true identity. The words spoken by the voice from the heavens identify Jesus as God's "beloved Son" (Mark 1:11). The rest of the Gospel describes how this beloved Son fulfills the mission given to him by God—a mission that will result in his execution.

WHERE is God in these words?

— From "Theological Perspective," Lee Barrett

Jesus' baptism does more than initiate the beloved Son's career of obedient suffering. A mysterious connection is implied between Jesus' identity as the suffering, obedient Son and Jesus' empowerment by the Spirit. This critical descent of the Spirit catalyzes Jesus' potent public ministry with its exercise of power over demons, sin, the law, and even nature. Jesus did not receive the Spirit in order to enjoy privately its spiritual benefits, but rather in order to pass it on. The church has claimed that Jesus underwent baptism so that we might commune with him in baptism and share his empowerment by the Spirit. If our baptism involves a participation in Jesus' baptism, and if Jesus' baptism initiates his ministry of suffering obedience, then our baptism must include a similar acceptance of self-denial.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From "Pastoral Perspective," Elton W. Brown

When John the baptizer testifies that Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit, he is declaring what all of Mark's Gospel declares: that the ministry of Jesus is the beginning of the eschatological reign of God. The Spirit that is the sign of the turning of the ages has now been poured forth on Jesus. From now on, he and those who follow him are blessed and stuck with an eschatological mission: to declare and embody God's reign.

NOW WHAT is God's word calling us to do?

— From "Homiletical Perspective," Ted A. Smith

Baptism of the Lord Sunday can be a great day for congregations to celebrate the tearing open of the heavens. The coming stretch of Ordinary Time will carry us into the hard work of discipleship. But before Mark takes readers on that journey, the Gospel gives us a moment to taste and see and hear the goodness of the Lord. Today makes God's love *manifest* in word, song, sacrament, and prayer. It is a day to wear white and shout hallelujah. The heavens have been torn open, and this is a day to bask in the love they reveal.

FOCUS SCRIPTURE

Mark 1:4–11

Focus on Your Teaching

It is only the second week of January and many New Year's resolutions are surely getting tested and broken. Frustration at lack of willpower and the power of bad habits may have some participants downcast. Others may be doing just fine. Today's text offers the chance to consider a change that happens at baptism for all of us and may help participants put their resolutions in perspective.

O God of revelation, open my eyes, my heart, and my mind that I might behold Jesus and be drawn closer to him. Amen.

LEADING THE SESSION

YOU WILL NEED

- small bowl filled with water
- board or newsprint
- colored markers or crayons
- Bibles of the same translation
- copies of Resource Sheet 2
- copies of Resource Sheet 1
- pens
- paper
- copies of Resource Sheet 1 for January 17, 2021

For Responding

- option 1: paper, colored markers or crayons, baptism symbols
- option 2: computer, tablet, or smartphone
- option 3: pens, paper

GATHERING

Before the session, place the small bowl with water in a central location in the room. If using option 1 in Responding, do a Google Image search for “Baptism Symbols,” select a variety of symbols, and print them. Attach these symbols to a board or newsprint. Locate the board or newsprint so that the symbols are noticeable to the group, but not in the way.

Welcome participants and introduce any visitors. To prepare for a brief, guided meditation, invite participants to sit comfortably in their chairs, close their eyes, and take a few deep breaths. After a moment of silence, follow this script:

- ✠ *Remember a time when you experienced a new beginning. This new beginning might have been moving to a new community, starting a new job, meeting a new friend, or experiencing the birth of a child. (pause)*
- ✠ *As you remember this experience, what do you see? (pause) hear? (pause) smell? (pause)*
- ✠ *What feelings do you experience? (pause)*

After a few moments, ask the participants to return to the present and open their eyes. Invite a few volunteers to tell about the feelings they experienced.

Hold up the bowl of water. Tell everyone that during this session the group will explore the baptism of Jesus—a new beginning for him. The bowl of water is present to remind the members of the group that they have been baptized, like Jesus.

Distribute the Bibles and instruct the participants to turn to Psalm 29 from today's lectionary readings. They may use their own Bibles if they have a similar translation. Invite the participants to begin the session by reading verses 1–4 responsively. A leader will read verses 1 and 3; the group, verses 2 and 4.

A variety of baptisms and washings existed in Judaism. John's baptism is unique. His baptism is a sign of repentance (a change of mind) and commitment to the approaching kingdom of God.

EXPLORING

Have a volunteer read Mark 1:4–11.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 2 (Baptism Story Comparisons). Have the participants read the four baptism accounts silently. When they have finished reading, form four groups. Have the first group compare the stories in Matthew and Mark, the second group Mark and Luke, the third group Luke and John, and the fourth group John and Matthew. If your group is smaller than eight people, then form two groups. Have the first group compare Matthew and Mark and the second group Luke and John. After several minutes call the participants together and have them report their findings and tell what was highlighted in each Gospel account.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Mark 1:4–11). Have a volunteer read the “Where?” excerpt. Ask:

- ✪ What was the purpose of Jesus' baptism?
- ✪ Why was the descent of the Holy Spirit critical?
- ✪ In what way is the empowerment by the Holy Spirit connected to ministry?
- ✪ How is a Christian's baptism linked to Jesus' baptism?

Distribute pens and paper to the participants. Have them read the “So What?” excerpt. Invite participants to write a haiku poem about baptism. Haiku is a Japanese poetic form, traditionally consisting of three lines containing phrases of five, seven, and five syllables respectively. The last line usually makes an observation about the subject in the first two lines. Provide an example if people need one, such as:

Winter is coming.
Snow will be arriving soon.
We should rake the leaves.

After a few minutes, invite volunteers to read their poems.

As a transition to Responding, have a volunteer read the “Now What?” excerpt. Ask the participants what they see as evidence that the heavens have been torn open in their congregation and in their lives.

RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities depending on the length of your session:

1. **A Personal Symbol** Participants will draw a meaningful symbol of baptism, offering the chance to reflect on its significance in their lives. Distribute paper and colored markers or crayons. Direct the participants' attention to the board or newsprint on which you have hung the baptismal symbols. Invite each participant to select a symbol that is meaningful to him or her and to draw that symbol on his or her paper. Encourage them to be colorful and creative. After the participants have finished, have a few volunteers tell why the symbol they chose was meaningful to them. Suggest that the participants take their symbols home and display them so they may be reminded of significant aspects of their baptisms throughout the week.

**EASY
PREP**

2. **A Baptismal Song** Baptism is a time to celebrate God's love and grace. "Borning Cry" by John Ylvisaker is often sung as a baptism song. Search the internet for a video of "Borning Cry" by John Ylvisaker. Play the music video "Borning Cry." Allow time for the participants to reflect on the words of the song. Invite them to explain what message it has for each of them. Encourage the participants to be alert for glimpses of God's presence in their lives this week. Suggest that they keep a small journal and record their glimpses.

3. **A Baptism Letter** Pretending to be God, participants will write what they believe God did at their baptism. Distribute pens and paper and ask the participants to imagine themselves to be God. As God, have the participants write letters to themselves on the occasion of their baptisms. Tell the participants that the letter should include a description of what God did at their baptisms, in as much detail as possible, and what God hopes will happen in their lives as a result of their baptisms. When everyone has finished, give a few volunteers the opportunity to read what they have written. Encourage all of the participants to read their letters at least once a day for the coming week. Suggest to the participants that, at the end of the week, they may want to take time to reflect on their baptism and its effect on their lives, and write down their reflections in a return letter to God.

CLOSING

Have the participants form a circle. Take the small bowl with water from its central location. Dip your finger into the water and make the sign of the cross on the forehead of the person on your left. As you do so, say, "(Name), remember that you have been baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." When finished, hand the bowl to the individual and ask him or her to follow your example with the person on his or her left. Go around the circle.

Pray this prayer, or one of your choosing:

Glorious God, when Jesus was baptized for your healing mission, the heavens opened in a flash of glory as vision and voice blazed upon the waters. May your Spirit so burn in us that we hear your Word translated into deed and follow Jesus in paths of justice, right relationships, and peace. Amen.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for January 17, 2021, or e-mail it to the participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and resource sheet before the next session.

There may be people in your group who are not baptized. If this is the case, you may offer a blessing (in these or similar words): "The blessing of the Triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—be with you always."

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Baptism Story Comparisons

The four Gospel accounts of Jesus' baptism are below. They contain many similarities, but also some striking differences. Each Gospel writer edited the baptism story so that it would speak most clearly to its intended audience and also stress the theological concepts they believed were the most significant.

Mark 1:9-11

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Matthew 3:13-17

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Luke 3:21-22

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 from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

John 1:29-34

The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.' I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel." And John testified, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God."