

Collide with a Promise Kept



Focus scripture

Luke 3:7–18

Additional scriptures

Zephaniah 3:14–20

Isaiah 12:2–6

Philippians 4:4–7

Anxiety is in the air as the crowds come to John to be baptized. John proclaims the Messiah is coming in such a way that the people begin to scramble to get ready. They've heard prophecies their whole lives, and yet they come to John as if they are in need of instruction. They panic, as though they have been on a collision course that will end in their destruction. John reminds them not to fret; just do what they already know must be done.

Focus scripture: Luke 3:7–18

This week, we skip forward from the infancy and early childhood narratives and find ourselves on the cusp of meeting the adult Jesus as he begins his ministry, but we are still in the company of John.

This passage is part of the gospel writer's "set up" of John the baptizer and his role in the Jesus story: John's appearance in the desert; his career as a preacher and baptizer; and then, in a later section, his imprisonment by Herod (Luke 3:1—4:13). On at least two planes, it seems a strange passage to interject into this season that anticipates the birth of Jesus.

We have moved towards a more celebratory Advent season in recent times, and thus we may want to revisit some of the traditional interpretations of the text. The transition of the text to a positive sense can suggest that perhaps John is not so angry with the crowds – he does baptize them, after all, and offers them practical advice on how to live – but instead means his greeting is almost tongue-in-cheek tone. Imagine John's surprise, leading him to remark something along the lines of "Well, well, well, look who's here! What, pray tell, has moved you to flee from the wrath to come? What has inspired you to look for alternatives?"

Beyond that, we need to be careful about how we understand the latter parts of the passage. Tradition has suggested that some of us may be wheat while others are chaff; some will be gathered into Christ's granary, and others cast aside. Except, wheat and chaff are parts of the same plant. The stronger implication is that John is offering good news about Jesus. He will refine and purify us, ridding us of our "chaff" – the things that hinder us and weigh us down. All will be gathered into his granary. Numerous stories of Jesus' inclusive ministry support this view.

The gospel writer's concern for the poor shapes the practical advice that John gives to the gathered crowds, taking into account their situations in life. To the tax collectors, John

advises that they should not collect more than is due. The soldiers, he says, should not use their power to extort or intimidate. To those ordinary people who ask for advice, John tells them to share what they have. In other words, everyone can start exactly where they are and live a more God-centred life. This is where the joy is – in recognizing that God meets us where we are, begins to transform us, and leads us into a fuller and God-like life.

While the joy in the focus passage must be teased out, singing and rejoicing filled the supporting readings for this Sunday.

Zephaniah 3:14–20 rejoices in the hope of Jerusalem's restoration through the One who will "gather" Israel. Verse 17 reveals that God rejoices over us! Such joy at God's nearness helps us discern why the early church heard John's challenging message as good news.

Isaiah 12:2–6 echoes Zephaniah's sentiments. The prophet declares that joy is to be found in the "wells of salvation," freeing us to "shout aloud and sing for joy" as we remember and proclaim God's mighty works.

The words of **Philippians 4:4–7** invite the church to rejoice in God, whose peace shapes and guards our lives. Paul reminds his readers to, as the old song says, take everything to God in prayer. We are left with a sense of trust, of peace, and calm.

•••••

John holds his audience accountable out of loving concern – not vindictive anger. He calls them a brood of vipers because that is how they're acting; it's not who they were created to be. John lives into the prophetic tradition of teaching the vulnerable to take heart and get to work; he gives us all practical advice and the encouragement we need to act. This is not a collision course with an angry god; our feet have been set on a path that will cause hearts to collide with the compassionate heart of Immanuel, who keeps the promise.

Holy Mystery, we are eager to celebrate the day of your appearance, birth. You interrupted the human experience of division between divinity and humanity. You caused your presence to intersect with ours in new ways. All of this continues today. Give us strength and imagination to understand who we are in light of the experiences we share. Amen.

If you have Internet access, visit www.seasonsonline.ca to access Spirit Sightings for connections between current events and the focus passage.



The Focus for Adults

We're halfway through the season of preparation. Are we preparing to have a perfect holiday, or are we preparing for the future in a more significant way?

Adults have had a lifetime of experiences around the question, "what should we do?" They face choices about career paths with issues ranging from potential advancement to ethical questions about "climbing the ladder." Adults with children weigh decisions about how and where (and in what schools) to nurture them. Those facing retirement may wonder whether sharing now will leave them vulnerable later. In the face of changing circumstances – in the realization of responsibility and opportunity – we continually want to know if what we do is enough or right.

To ask another person "what should we do" calls for trust and some level of comfort with being vulnerable. In the focus passage for this week, people asked this question of John the baptizer. They did so not because his answer would be easy or comfortable. They did so because they trusted John's word about what would lead to a stronger relationship with God.

Be aware that for some group members, the call in John's prophetic word may be beyond what they feel they can do at this time. Work together to create an attitude of openness to John's words, trusting that God continues to seek and love us, even as we struggle to discern what it means to live faithfully. Pray that all group members may grow as they seek ways to respond to the challenge of John's good news.

Prepare

Before the session

- ❑ Read and prayerfully reflect on this week's scriptures, Isaiah 12:2–6, Zephaniah 3:14–20, Luke 3:7–18, Philippians 4:4–7, and [biblical background](#) material (p. 15). Review article "[John the Baptizer](#)" (p. 93).
- ❑ To access connections between current events and the focus passage, visit www.seasonsonline.ca and click on *Spirit Sightings*. Bring information that might inform this week's session.
- ❑ Set a worship space with blue or purple fabric (according to the tradition of your congregation), an open Bible, and an Advent wreath with four candles (four blue, or three purple and one pink).
- ❑ Bring Bibles, matches, and [basic supply kit](#) (p. 2).
- ❑ Bring, if possible, *Seasons Songbook* (Volume 5) and *Seasons Music CD* (Volume 5), CD or MP3 player; downloadable sheet music and MP3 recordings are available at www.seasonsonline.ca.

Gather

- ❑ Bring copies of resource sheet "[Prayers for Advent](#)" (p. 91); save copies for next week.
- ❑ Bring, if possible, song "All Is Wonder" (p. 7 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 5; #17 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 5).

Respond

Choose one or two options. Prepare and bring the materials.

- ❑ **Dig deeper:** copies of resource sheet "[Images of John in the Gospels](#)"
- ❑ **Advent prayer:** pieces of footprint-shaped paper
- ❑ **Spiritual practice: Holy Reading** nothing extra required

Bless

- ❑ Bring copies of resource sheet "[Prayer of Commissioning](#)."
- ❑ Bring, if possible, song "Go" (p. 22–23 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 5; #22 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 5).
- ❑ Bring copies of [biblical background](#) material for December 23 (p. 21).



Collide with a Promise Kept

Scripture

Luke 3:7–18

FOCUS To discern, in John's message, guidance for faithful living

Gather

Welcome participants and introduce any newcomers or visitors.

Opening ritual

Gather around the worship space. Distribute copies of the resource sheet "[Prayers for Advent](#)" (p. 91) and invite two volunteers to lead the prayer for "Advent Three" and light three candles of the Advent wreath.

Sing or listen to, if possible, the song "All Is Wonder" (p. 7 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 5; #17 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 5).

Moving into the theme

Invite group members to think about a relationship that they value deeply and reflect in silence on the following questions:

- **What words and actions have deepened that relationship?**
- **How has that relationship changed you?**
- **What needs to happen in order for relationships to grow stronger and deeper?**

Engage

Setting the context

Recall last week's focus passage, which focused on the birth of John and Zechariah's prophecy over his newborn son. John became known as the baptizer and the gospels place his ministry in the wilderness, a place of both preparation and discovery. John has been preaching in the wilderness around the Jordan River, far from the temple and the palace of the Roman governor in Jerusalem. This week's reading continues the account of John the baptizer's preaching in the wilderness.

Exploring the texts

Invite the group to read **Luke 3:7–18** as a drama. Ask for volunteers to be the narrator and John the baptizer, and invite the remaining group members to play the roles of the "crowds," the tax collectors, and the soldiers. John's reproof can come across as harsh. Prophets are often unpopular because what they ask of us are not a part of our plans. Sometimes, the positive messages can be as challenging as the gloomy messages.

- **What is easier for you to engage: good news or bad news?**

We call the gospel "the good news" but perhaps there are times when it feels like something other

than "good."

- **What other descriptions would you use for the "news" John the baptizer delivers in the gospel of Luke?**

Luke 3:17 refers to the process by which wheat is harvested. During harvesting, what has served its purpose (chaff) is separated. John uses this metaphor alongside his appeals, but we sometimes hear only a warning that causes fear rather than inspiration. John might be explaining our need for Christ's presence to help us sort out all that is within each of us. Christ's presence can guide us as we sort out what has served a purpose for a time but what is now keeping us from an abundant life.

- **How might this metaphor in Luke 3 be "good news"?**
- **What metaphor would you use to tell of Christ's presence in our discernment and development?**

Other readings Ask volunteers to read two other scripture readings for this day: **Isaiah 12:2–6** and **Zephaniah 3:14–20**. As a whole group, note the phrases and themes that are common to both (for example: "God in your midst," "do not be afraid," "rejoice/sing for joy"). Discuss:

- **What connections do you find between the causes for joy announced by these prophets and the exhortation from John?**

Invite group members to read silently **Philippians 4:4–7**. Discuss:

- **How do these words echo the words of Isaiah, Zephaniah, and John?**
- **How might Paul answer the question “what should we do?”?**

Making life connections

John the baptizer asked people to remember that there are simple things they can do every day; acts that calm, comfort, and bring us closer to Christ.

- **How can you, individually and as the church, act as a prophetic voice to prioritize and engage in long-term efforts toward a more just community?**

Respond

Choose one or more of the following options.

- **Dig deeper: Exploring John in the gospels** John the baptizer speaks a powerful word about faithful living. Invite the group to explore the important role John plays in the account of Jesus in the New Testament. Distribute copies of the resource sheet “[Images of John in the Gospels](#).” Read the introduction together, then form four pairs or groups to review a section each. Share information with the whole group and work on a summary together.
- **Advent prayer** The message proclaimed by John can guide our faith journey and our actions on behalf of others. Sharing the good news of God’s powerful reign can happen in a variety of ways. Have group members imagine standing before John and asking, “What should I



do?” and what John’s reply might be. Distribute the footprint-shaped pieces of paper and invite group members to reflect on what they are being called to do as they journey through Advent, and to write their reflections as a prayer.

- **Spiritual practice: Holy Reading** *Lectio divina* or “holy reading,” is an ancient practice of meditating on scripture. Invite participants to engage in a reflection on this week’s focus passage. Read Luke 3:7–18. Identify an individual or group for whom the fulfillment of these words would be good news. Prayerfully seek the Spirit’s leading in discerning an action you can take on their behalf. Move forward with this action; do it as one anointed by God’s spirit. If time is limited, encourage them to use this discipline to guide devotion time at home.

Bless

Gather around the lit Advent candles again. Invite participants to reflect for a few moments on John the Baptizer’s call to faithful living, and on how they might respond to the question: What should we do? Form two groups and distribute copies of the resource sheet “[Prayer of Commissioning](#).” Lead the group in reading this prayer.

Sing, or listen to, if possible, the song “Go” (p. 22–23 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 5; #22 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 5).

Pray the “Prayer of Commissioning” (p. 20).

Distribute the [biblical background](#) material for December 23 (p. 21).

Reflect

In what ways did the group members hear John’s message as threatening? How did they hear it as hopeful? What worked well in your group’s discussion of such challenging words? What did not work as well?



Images of John in the Gospels

Each of the four gospels includes an account of John the baptizer, sometimes called John the baptist. Each of these accounts offers a similar picture of John's preaching and activity in the region of the Jordan River just before the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. John plays an important role in the story of Jesus, setting the stage for Jesus' ministry and announcing the coming of the Messiah. What can we learn about John – and his family and his followers – from these gospel accounts?

As you explore these passages about John, refer to any study notes and cross-references in your Bible for more information.

John the baptizer in Matthew

Matthew 3:1–17

- What is "fruit worthy of repentance"?
- How does John describe the focus of Jesus' ministry?

Matthew 4:12–14

- What is Jesus' response to John's death?

John the baptizer in Luke

Luke 1:5–6; 57–66

- Who are John's parents?
- What is the reaction to John's birth?

Luke 1:36–37

- What relation do you think John is to Jesus?

John the baptizer in Mark

Mark 1:1–9

- What message does John proclaim?
- Referring to 2 Kings 1:7–8, what is the significance of John's clothing?

Mark 6:17–29

- Why does Herod have John arrested and executed?

John the baptizer in John

John 1:19–34

- How do you think John understands his mission?

John 1:35–42

- What do we learn about John's disciples?

Considering all you have read, summarize the role of John the baptizer and his importance in the story of Jesus.



PRAYER OF COMMISSIONING

Based on excerpts from Isaiah 12:2–6, Zephaniah 3:14–20,
Luke 3:7–18, and Philipians 4:4–7.

All: What then should we do?

Group 1: Whoever has two coats must share with those who have none.

Group 2: And whoever has food must do likewise.

Group 1: Rejoice, for God is in your midst.

Group 2: God has taken away the judgments against you.

Group 1: God will rejoice over you with gladness.

Group 2: God will remove disaster from you and bring you home.

Group 1: Trust, and do not be afraid, for God is your strength.

Group 2: Sing for joy, for great in your midst is the Holy One.

Group 1: Rejoice in God always.

Group 2: Let your gentleness be known to everyone.

Group 1: Do not worry about anything.

Group 2: Make your requests known to God in prayer.

Group 1: Give thanks to God, and make God's deeds known.

Group 2: And the peace of God will guard your hearts and minds.

All: What then should we do?

Proclaim this good news to the people!

Prayers for Advent

Advent One

- One:** The Season of Advent invites us to share in God's promises, in the scriptures and in the promise of Jesus' coming.
- Two:** As we wait for God's promises to be revealed we light a candle to represent our anticipation. (*Lights one blue or purple candle.*)
- One:** May we wait with patience and with trust.
- Two:** May we live with expectation and hope.
- All:** O God, come journey with us through Advent, as we choose hope in this "now and not yet" time. Amen.

Advent Three

- One:** The Season of Advent invites us to look forward, to re-orient our lives to reflect God's reign of justice.
- Two:** We light the first two candles again, remembering God's promises and our longing for peace. (*Lights two blue or purple candles.*) We light a third candle to represent our repentance and joy. (*Lights another blue or the pink candle.*)
- One:** May we wait with patience and with trust.
- Two:** May we live with expectation and hope.
- All:** O God, come journey with us through Advent, as we proclaim the good news in this "now and not yet" time. Amen.

Advent Two

- One:** The Season of Advent invites us to share in God's blessing, as we live toward God's reign.
- Two:** We light the first candle again, remembering God's promises. (*Lights one blue or purple candle.*) We light a second candle to represent our longing for peace. (*Lights second blue or purple candle.*)
- One:** May we wait with patience and with trust.
- Two:** May we live with expectation and hope.
- All:** O God, come journey with us through Advent, as we travel in the way of peace in this "now and not yet" time. Amen.

Advent Four

- One:** The Season of Advent invites us to celebrate, to sing of birth and re-birth for all creation.
- Two:** We light the first three candles again, remembering God's promise to be with us, to bring peace and joy. (*Lights three blue candles or two purple and one pink candle.*) We light the last candle to remind us of Mary's song of justice and salvation. (*Lights last blue or purple candle.*)
- One:** May we wait with patience and with trust.
- Two:** May we live with expectation and hope.
- All:** O God, come journey with us through Advent, as we live with love in this "now and not yet" time. Amen.



JOHN THE BAPTIZER

Here's a trick question for a game of trivia:

The gospel of Luke begins with the story of whose birth?

(Answer: John the baptizer)

John's father was a priest named Zechariah. Luke identifies his mother, Elizabeth, as a "relative" of Mary the mother of Jesus. The exact meaning of "relative" is unclear. Any impression that John and Jesus would grow up together and know each other as cousins is dismissed by John 1:33 ("I myself did not know him" – John speaking of Jesus). The gospels do not focus on the family ties between John and Jesus. What matters is the relationship of their ministries.

John the Baptizer, as his unofficial "surname" indicates, urged a symbolic washing linked to repentance to signify the new life of turning to God. He was not alone. The Dead Sea Scrolls have made clear that at least some of the communities associated with those writings practiced regular ritual washings. Like them, John the Baptizer exercised his ministry in the Judean wilderness. The valley of the Jordan River wound far below and a long day's journey from Jerusalem. John had a following of disciples not unlike those who would later follow Jesus. Several of John's disciples became Jesus' disciples (John 1:36–37). Some scholars suggest that much of the material about John in the first chapter of Luke originated among John's followers.

Zechariah's blessing (Luke 1:68–79) names John a prophet. That does not mean he will be a fortune teller. A prophet is rather a truth-teller. And the truth John has come to declare is the approach of God and the preparation required to ready our lives for that coming. In Luke 3, we find material that indicates the preparation John sought. To be sure, baptism or some ritual form of washing was involved. But John the Baptizer was by no means interested in purely symbolic expressions of turning. His call was for transformed lives. When the crowds, then

tax collectors, and finally soldiers ask what they should do: John offers specific guidance directly related to the conduct of their lives and professions. It is not business as usual, with everyone for themselves. The ethic is sharing. The ethic is justice. John's motive for action is expectation, and that expectation is in Luke's words "good news" (*euaggellion*).

John's proclamation is close in spirit to the ethical direction of Jesus' "sermon on the mount" (Matthew 5–7). Both proclaimed the nearness of God's coming that evoked the need for turning (repentance) and trust in God. Both died at the hands of abusive political power (John by order of Herod Antipas, Jesus by order of Pilate).

Traditionally, the church has portrayed John purely as one who "prepares the way." The gospels are filled with that imagery. "I baptize you with water. . . he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire" (Luke 3:16). "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). "I am not worthy to carry his sandals" (Matthew 3:11). Perhaps some of that portrayal owed to a desire to draw into the church those who continued to follow John's teachings. Or, as others suggest, that "subordination" may have reflected a desire to undercut the arguments of John's followers that he, not Jesus, was the one to follow.

What is clear, however, is the major role played by John the Baptizer in that era and in association with Jesus. Family or not, rival or not, John and Jesus changed the landscape in ministries with remarkable connections: a common announcement of the good news of God's coming, and lives called to transformation as a result.

John Indermark has been a frequent writer for the *Seasons of the Spirit* resources. This article first appeared in the Advent, Christmas, Epiphany 2006-07 resources.

