

# Remembering God's Promises



**Focus scripture**  
**Luke 3:15–17,**  
**21–22**

**Additional scriptures**  
**Isaiah 43:1–7**  
**Psalm 29**  
**Acts 8:14–17**

On Baptism of Jesus Sunday, we are reminded of God's promises fulfilled in Jesus. Luke's account of Jesus' baptism identifies Jesus as the manifestation of God's salvation as described in the Hebrew scriptures. In the same way that Luke's baptism narrative invites us to take a backward glance at the promises of the Hebrew scriptures, this week's Isaiah passage encourages a future gaze to the fulfilment of God's promise to one day gather people from East, West, North, and South in the realm of God. This week's backward glance and future gaze remind us that Jesus is the centre of all of God's promises.

## **Focus scripture: Luke 3:15–17, 21–22**

While this week's focus scripture does not use the word "promise," it serves as a promise that Jesus is the fulfilment of God's ultimate reign of love and justice. As the crowd questions John the baptizer's identity, John clarifies his role in God's unfolding promise by pointing to Jesus. John doesn't claim the name Messiah for himself but says that the one who comes next is more powerful. John baptizes with water, but the one who is coming will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. The people are hoping, anticipating, expecting to see the Messiah, the anointed; they catch a glimpse at Jesus' baptism. The heavens open, the Holy Spirit descends like a dove, and a voice says, "You are my Son, the Beloved."

Even though generations remove us from Jesus' baptism, we, too, are recipients of God's promise made incarnate in Jesus. We have been united with Christ in baptism and called children of God. We are God's beloved and called into God's reign of love and justice?

**Isaiah 43:1–7** speaks of God's promises fulfilled and tells of God's future work. Verse one offers assurance that God has redeemed Israel. Assurance is given again in verse five with the promise that God will gather the offspring of God's people. This shift to the future tense recalls the promises made in Deuteronomy 30:4 and Nehemiah 1:9. As we hear these words again this week, we remember that God has fulfilled many promises and God's promises go ahead of us, providing hope and evoking faithfulness among God's people. We are reminded not to fear because God is faithful and God's promises are for all whom God created, formed, and made.

**Psalm 29** draws attention to the creative power God's voice and reminds us that God's word has the power to shape all of creation. The power and majesty of God's voice is described as being able to break cedars. Verses 7–9 further reveal the power of God's voice to flash fire, shake the wilderness, and bring forth winds that strip the forest bare. God's voice has dominion over all of creation, and all say "Glory!" As we read Psalm 29 in concert with the description of Jesus' baptism, we are struck again with the image of the fire and the Holy Spirit, and we are reminded of the power of the words from heaven to remake all of creation through the shaping of Jesus' ministry.

**Acts 8:14–17** explains how the reception of the Holy Spirit was essential for the baptized people in Samaria. For this reason, Peter and John were sent to pray for the people of Samaria to receive the Holy Spirit, and to lay hands on them. As we read this passage alongside the account of the baptism of Jesus, we realize that it was not the power of the water, nor the power of John the baptizer's words, but the power of the Holy Spirit with us that changes the focus of our lives.



We are invited to the banks of the river Jordan and see of how Jesus, the child of God, came into the world to live among God's people as the anointed one, a fulfilment of God's promised reign of justice and love. The power of the voice from heaven and the Holy Spirit makes this identity more fully known. As those who believe in the promises of God and as those united with Christ in Baptism, we, beloved children of God, are also sent to reveal God's reign of love and justice in our communities.

**Holy Spirit, open us to your possibilities and your promises. Help us hear, with fresh ears, the story of God's definitive revelation in Jesus. May God's voice speak to our hearts, dispel our fear, and call us by name. Amen.**

If you have Internet access, visit [www.seasonsonline.ca](http://www.seasonsonline.ca) to access Spirit Sightings for connections between current events and the focus passage.



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## The Focus for Adults

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This Sunday we hear about Jesus' baptism, we hear about the power of the voice of God and the essential gift of the Holy Spirit. The voice from heaven, the Holy Spirit, and fire are used to establish Jesus' relationship with God: he is the son, "the Beloved." The word "beloved" originates from be + love, or to love.

As God's children, we are not only named as God's dearly loved, but we are also called to embody love, to demonstrate love to others. Yet we are not perfect: we make mistakes and all of us behave in unChrist-like ways at times. Our baptisms are a reminder than we can start over again

The adults in your group may have had differing experiences of baptism, and some may not have been baptized. This session may generate thoughts or questions from a group member about baptism for herself or himself, or for a family member. Be prepared to direct that individual to those responsible for preparing for baptism in your church.

Pray for God's Spirit to open all group members to the heart of this passage and its gracious affirmations.

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## Prepare

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### Before the session

- ❑ Read and prayerfully reflect on this week's scriptures, Psalm 29; Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22; Acts 8:14-17, and [biblical background](#) material (p. 43).
- ❑ To access connections between current events and the focus passage, visit [www.seasonsonline.ca](http://www.seasonsonline.ca) and click on *Spirit Sightings*. Bring information that might inform this week's session.
- ❑ Set a worship space with white fabric, an open Bible, and a candle.
- ❑ Bring Bibles, matches, and [basic supply kit](#) (p. 2).
- ❑ Bring, if possible, *Seasons Songbook* (Volume 8) and *Seasons Music CD* (Volume 8), CD or MP3 player; downloadable sheet music and MP3 recordings are available at [www.seasonsonline.ca](http://www.seasonsonline.ca).

### Gather

- ❑ Bring, if possible, song "Spirit Come" (pp. 36-37 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 8; #23 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 8).

### Engage

- ❑ Bring copies of resource sheet "[Prayer](#)."

### Respond

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

- ❑ **Dig deeper:** copies of resource sheet "[Baptism before Jesus](#)"
- ❑ **Reflection:** nothing extra required
- ❑ **Baptism cards:** copies of your church's liturgy for baptism, card stock, gel pens
- ❑ **Spiritual practice: Holy Reading** nothing extra required

### Bless

- ❑ Bring, if possible, song "I Am a Child of God" (p. 19 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 8; #13 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 8).
- ❑ Bring copies of [biblical background](#) material for January 20 (p. 49).



# Remembering God's Promises

## Scripture

Luke 3:15–17,  
21–22

**FOCUS** To explore the role of God's promises and love in our lives

## Gather

**Welcome** participants and introduce any newcomers or visitors.

### Opening ritual

**Gather** in the worship space and light the candle, commenting that this is the first Sunday in the Season after the Epiphany. Note that *epiphany* comes from a word meaning to “come toward” or “a revealing.”

**Pray** Form two groups to read **Psalm 29** as an opening prayer, alternating verses.

**Sing or listen to**, if possible, the song “Spirit Come” (pp. 36–37 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 8; #23 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 8).

### Moving into the theme

Reflect on a promise made to you long-ago that you are still waiting to be realized, or a promise that you are fulfilling over a lifetime, or a promise you still plan to achieve.

■ **Was this a promise made across generations?**

## Engage

### Setting the context

The gospel readings during the Season after the Epiphany traditionally speak of Jesus being revealed to the world and Jesus revealing God to others. This season begins with the story of Jesus' baptism, in which something about Jesus is “revealed.” Review the first few paragraphs about the focus passage in the [biblical background](#) to set the stage for this account.

### Exploring the texts

Invite a volunteer to read **Luke 3:15–17, 21–22**. Notice that the story begins with verses read during the third Sunday of Advent. Today we might presume that “expectation” relates to an individual's mood.

- **What do you think it means that the people in this story were filled with expectation? Do you think their expectation was connected to politics, religion, or mood?**
- **Since information was shared word-of-mouth, would you say expectation was a characteristic more frequently connected to a community or an individual?**

The expectations and questions described in verse 15 might complement or neutralize each other.

■ **How can expectations and questions be held in tension?**

The dove in verse 22 recalls God's promise to Noah for new life, and also gives us two more names for Jesus: Son and the Beloved

■ **What events in your life have brought about a change that was so momentous it marked a “new life” for you?**

■ **In what ways do you understand yourself to be “beloved,” by others and by God?**

**Other readings** Isaiah 43:1–7 identifies being “called by name” as a sign of being able to live without fear:

■ **How does the naming, which is a significant part of the baptismal right, relate to overcoming fear in our lives?**

Conversely, prisoners are sometimes called by number, not name; so were prisoners during the holocaust, etc.

■ **In what ways might having “no name,” being anonymous, cause fear?**

### Making life connections

Christians believe Jesus to be the fulfilment of God's promises. We see Jesus as that answer, while, at the same time, we long to see the fullness of God's promises. As we wait with expectancy and questioning in our heart, we remember that we are created and called to join in the unfolding of God's reign of justice and love.

■ **How do you see yourself as the recipient of God's promise?**

■ **How do you see yourself as a promise keeper? How do you see the church as a promise keeper?**

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## Respond

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Choose one or more of the following options.

❑ **Dig deeper: Baptism** Our understandings and practices of baptism grow out of traditions that predate Jesus and John. Distribute copies of the resource sheet "[Baptism before Jesus](#)" and review the information. Discuss what those traditions add to your understanding of John's baptism. How do these ancient traditions compare and contrast with how we understand baptism today?



❑ **Meditation** As Jesus was praying, he was blessed by the Spirit and words of affirmation. Read aloud these words based on Luke 3:22: "You are my beloved child, with you I am well pleased" and invite the group to reflect in silence on them. Then offer the following questions for silent reflection, pausing after each one: How does it feel to have these words spoken to you? What does it mean that God speaks these words to those whom you love? What does it mean to you that God speaks these words to those with whom you are in conflict?



❑ **Baptism cards** God's claims and promises are expressed in various ways in the rituals of bap-

tism. Distribute copies of your church's liturgy and review together, looking for what it says about what happens in baptism. What links do you see between the account of Jesus' baptism and the words and actions of your church's liturgy or ritual? Write a blessing for those who will be baptized in your church. Write these on the inside of folded pieces of card stock, adding baptismal symbols or appropriate scripture verses to the front of the card. Give to your clergy person for distribution.

❑ **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 3:15-17, 21-22. Write one word and/or phrase from each text that speaks to you today. Write down your thoughts around those words and their connections with your faith. Offer prayer that centres on those words: in praise, in confession, in request. If time is limited, encourage them to use this discipline to guide devotion time at home.



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## Bless

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**Gather** around the lit candle again. Invite participants to tell what they will remember most from this session and why. Read aloud, if possible, the words for the song "I Am a Child of God" (p. 19 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 8; # 13 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 8). Discuss together how this song might be heard as an affirmation and as a way of celebrating God's Spirit and presence in our lives.

**Sing, or listen to**, if possible, the song "I Am a Child of God" (p. 19 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 8; # 13 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 8).

**Pray** the prayer on the [biblical background](#) page (p. 43).

**Distribute** the [biblical background](#) materials for January 20 (p. 49).

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## Reflect

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In what ways did members of the group respond to the affirmation that we are all God's beloved children? Did you sense any in the group feeling "left out" of the conversation? How might you and others affirm God's love for them?



# Baptism before Jesus

By John Indermark

“Now when all the people were baptized,  
and when Jesus also had been baptized. . .”

Luke 3:21

Unlike the other gospels, Luke does not directly state that John baptized Jesus, although the preceding verses about John's ministry lean in that direction. It is as if, in Luke, Jesus' baptism suddenly appears as an accomplished fact. But neither John nor his baptism appear out of nowhere. The gospels, especially Luke 1, are better at telling us the background for John. So what serves as the background for the practice of baptism?

The most ancient connections trace back to ritual washings prescribed in the Levitical code. Such washings had to do with restoring a state of ritual cleanness. They would follow such things as contact with a corpse or recovery from a skin disease. Only much later did the Pharisees and Essenes develop codes for ritual hand washings that formed daily practices of piety in the time of Jesus (see, for example, Mark 7:1–5).

Ritual washings and immersions could involve different types of water. Over time, those types of water came to be “rated” for their value, from lowest to highest:

- 1) standing collections of water less than approximately 125 gallons;
- 2) rain pools while it was still raining;
- 3) pools larger than 125 gallons;
- 4) certain types of wells;
- 5) water that was salty or hot;
- 6) “living water” (rivers, lakes, springs)

(New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, vol. 1, 2006,  
Abingdon Press, pg. 391)

Following the time of the exile in the 6th century BCE, gentile converts to Judaism were expected to undergo an immersion that came to be called “proselyte baptism.” Later traditions connected immersions to acts of repentance. The Essenes and the related communities by the Dead Sea (who produced or at least preserved the Dead Sea

Scrolls) of the last two centuries BCE and into the first century CE were noted for their frequent ritual washings and immersions related to purification. Many connect John to the Essene movement, both because of his isolation in the wilderness and for his emphasis on ritual washing (baptism) connected to repentance and the forgiveness of sins. The setting of the Jordan River for John's baptism relates back to “living water” as the most valued of waters.

The other important connection between the baptism John practiced and the immersions of the Essene and other such communities had to do with the emphasis upon repentance. We know little if anything about the mechanics of John's baptism, although we assume it meant full immersion. But what the gospels record clearly, as do the instructions in such documents as “Rule of the Community” (from the Dead Sea Scrolls) was the call for repentance from misdeeds. And for John, repentance involved not simply a turning from what one had done in the past – it positively sought new action in the present and future (see Luke 3:10–14) lived out in social conduct.

So consider then in summary the important elements of ritual washings and baptism before Jesus.

- Earlier immersions related to purification from a state of uncleanness to cleanness, which in the understanding of the day made one fit to enter into the presence of God.
- Earlier immersions related to acts of conversion and entrance into a new community.

Out of that background John “appeared” and baptized. Out of that background developed the church's practices and understandings of baptism.

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Prayer is important in the Gospel of Luke. Throughout the gospel we read of Jesus in prayer. At the outset of Jesus' ministry, the Spirit descends while he is praying (3:21). Before Jesus chooses the disciples, he spends the night in prayer (6:12). Luke reports that Jesus prays in moments of conflict (9:29, 22:42). Even at the point of death Jesus is in prayer (23:46). The gospel writer emphasizes that prayer is important to Jesus (5:16, 9:18, 9:28). As Luke's gospel tells the story of Jesus, prayer is Jesus' way of remaining in intimate relationship with God. Prayer helps Jesus stay connected with mission and call in the face of opposition and misunderstanding (18:1, 22:46). Through prayer, Jesus gains courage to remain faithful (22:42).

Jesus teaches the disciples – and by extension we who read Luke today – about prayer. Jesus instructs us in prayer (11:1–4), tells stories about prayer (11:5–13, 18:1–8), and encourages us to pray (18:1). Jesus is a role model for a life of prayer (11:1). There is little doubt that, for the community from which Luke's gospel comes, prayer was a central part of what it meant to be a follower of Jesus and a member of the community of faith.

Because prayer is so central to the life of faith, it is good to remind ourselves of the variety

of ways to pray that are practiced across the Christian community. In some traditions members spend their days in silent contemplation, only speaking after sundown. In others, when gathered for corporate worship, all members pray aloud at the same time, creating a wonderful cacophony of voices. In some traditions one always stands to pray; in others, one always kneels.

Some traditions create labyrinths – marked on the floor or created outdoors – inviting people to pray in silence as they walk. Some communities include African drums and chants

# Prayer

during times of prayer in worship. Some project video and computer images on huge screens. Some groups

use newspaper clippings and magazine images to guide prayer.

Some view slides of nature or people's faces. Some Christians use mantras or rosary beads to focus their prayers. Some contemplate icons and candles. People of faith sing the Psalms, dance, draw, write poetry, repeat certain motions, meditate on the stations of the cross, or recite the creeds of the church. There are many ways to practice faithfulness in prayer.

Jesus' strength came from his relationship with God through prayer. Prayer also keeps us in intimate contact with God. Prayer keeps us in closer connection to our mission and call. Prayer gives us courage and strength to face times of trial.

***When has prayer been most meaningful for you? What encourages you to be diligent in prayer?***