John the Baptist Prepares the Way



Scripture Reference: Luke 3:1-18

Suggested Theme: God wants to forgive us. We can have soft hearts that want to repent and follow God.

Memory Verse: "Create in me a pure heart, God. Make my spirit right again." Psalm 51:10, ICB

Story Overview:

John fulfilled the prophecy by preparing the way for the Messiah. He preached a convicting message of repentance to the ordinary person as well as to the hypocritical Pharisees of his day. Crowds followed John and showed their true repentance through baptism and a change in how they lived their daily lives. Hearts were being prepared for the messages Jesus would soon be preaching.

Background Study:

About seventeen years had passed since Jesus visited the temple at twelve. At this time, John the Baptist would be about thirty years of age, and his cousin, Jesus, was six months younger.

John the Baptist was a prophet. His formal introduction in Luke is similar to the formal introductions of other prophets in the Old Testament.
Luke 3:1-2; Jeremiah 1:1-4; Ezekiel 1:1-3; Hosea 1:1; Micah 1:1

- John's parents were elderly when he was born, so they might have died when he was young. This might have contributed to his spending a lot of time alone. He developed a "strong spirit," which he displayed many times in his confronting preaching style. (Luke 1:80)
- John's clothing was rough and durable, and his food was what he could find in the desert (Matthew 3:4). Roasted locusts are said to be very nutritious and not so bad to the taste (?!), especially when dipped in honey. Wild bees stored honey in the crevices of wilderness cliffs.
- As today's story opens, he is living in the desert country where he grew up. The Jordan River runs through the desert for the last few miles before it reaches the Dead Sea. This is where John began to preach (Matthew 3:1). Later, he preached in other parts of the country around the Jordan River (John 3:23).
- John was telling people to repent of their sins and be baptised as a sign of that repentance. That was how to prepare for the new king of the Jews – the Messiah. John was the voice crying in the wilderness (Isaiah 40:3-5). He prepared the way of the Lord (Luke 3:4). In doing this, John fulfilled prophecy.
- Although not covered in today's lesson, we know that John was later beheaded when he bravely preached his message of repentance to King Herod (Mark 6:14-29).

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John preached to a Jewish audience. He tells the Jews not to take their salvation for granted just because their parents were Jews. They had to obey God from the heart.

Repentance is a crucial concept in the Christian life. Repentence is all of the following:

- Recognising and feeling the sorrow that your life or actions do not align with God's will.
- Asking for forgiveness from God and those you have wronged.
- In his preaching, John said repentance involved changing one's actions. Actions show what is in the heart. It is not true repentance until it shows. This is the kind of heart that we should all strive to have.
- In essence, to repent means to change course. If you are walking in one direction, it is as if you make a U-turn and change to walk in a different direction.

The crowds responded to John's preaching by wanting to know how to repent. Repentance was unique to the situation each group of people were in. He told people not to be selfish. He told the tax collectors to be honest and to stop stealing from the people. He told the soldiers to be honest and not to mistreat people.

Some people thought John was the Messiah promised long ago (Isaiah 9:6-7). John made it very clear that he was not the Messiah. He was only an announcer to tell the people that the king was coming (John 1:19-23).

John said that he baptised with water, but the Messiah would baptise with the Holy Spirit. John's listeners did not understand all of this. Years later, when Jesus was about to ascend to heaven, he told his apostles that they would soon be baptised with the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:5). In Acts 2, we read that Jesus did pour out the Holy Spirit onto humankind in general and specifically into the hearts of those who were baptised.

Way to Introduce the Story:

(From Matthew 3:4) Help the children make honey and butter sandwiches. Talk about how good the honey tastes. Also, discuss how honey is made and how people used to find bee hives in trees and other places. They could eat the honey from those natural hives. "Today, we will learn about someone in the bible who used to eat honey. We first heard about this man when he was just a baby. His parents were very old, and they were so happy to have a baby. Do you remember who that was? (John) When John grew up, he went to live in the wilderness. While he was there, he ate wild honey and . . . locusts! How many of you wish you could eat some locusts on your sandwich?"

The Story:

Since John was a baby, his parents knew he would be unique. Just the fact that he was born was a miracle. It was a miracle because his parents were very old when he was born – way too old to have a baby. Only God could make that happen.

Another unique thing about John was that he was Jesus' cousin. They were born about six months apart.

When he grew up, John lived in the desert. There is not much food in the desert. John had to learn to eat all kinds of unusual things. He found some wild bees and could eat some honey from the honeycomb. He also ate something else that was unusual. John ate bugs! Sometimes, people back then would eat locusts. In some places today, people still eat locusts.

John also wore unusual clothes. He wore animal skins instead of regular clothing.

John was a good man. He obeyed God and always tried to do the right thing. God gave John a special job. John's job was to get people ready for Jesus to start preaching. This was a job that God had planned many, many years before.

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What do you think he needed to do to get the people ready? John did not build a church building or hand out invitations to hear Jesus preach. John knew that Jesus would want people to have good hearts. So, John taught people how to have soft hearts. Suppose a person has a “hard heart;” that means their heart will never change. If they have a “soft heart,” they will let God change their heart into the kind of heart he wants. John knew that the people needed to have soft hearts so they would be ready to hear Jesus preach.

John did not preach at the temple or in a church building. John would go down to the Jordan River and preach by the water. Soon, crowds of people gathered around John and listened to his message.

When John talked about soft hearts, there was one word he used to say a lot. That word was “REPENT.” John told all the people they needed to repent.

To repent means being very sorry for the wrong thing or things you have been doing. But repentance is more than saying you are sad.

To repent means to be sorry and stop doing the wrong thing. But repentance does not just mean being sorry and then to stop doing the wrong thing.

Repentance also means to be sorry, stop doing the wrong thing, change your life and start doing good things instead.

To repent means to change both your heart AND your actions.

Many people came to hear John preach. Some wanted to change their hearts and actions, and others did not. Some asked John what they should do.

John told some that changing their hearts meant they must stop being selfish. They must repent and start sharing the way God wants them to.

He told the tax collectors that they had to stop cheating people. They must repent and start being fair like God wants them to.

He told the soldiers to stop blaming people when things were not their fault. The soldiers must repent and stop complaining about people.

Then John told the listening people they needed to be baptised in the Jordan River to show they meant what they said. The baptism would mean that they repented for the things they were doing wrong. It would show that their hearts were soft and good.

Many people were baptised when John preached. That is why he is called “John the Baptist.”

All Jewish people knew a Messiah would come someday to save the people. John the Baptist was a great preacher. Was John the Baptist the Messiah?

No! John the Baptist was just the one who was getting everyone ready to listen to the Messiah. JESUS was coming. JESUS was the Messiah who would save His people.

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Ways to Tell the Story:

This story can be told using various methods. Always remain true to the facts found in the Bible, but help children connect to its meaning by using drama, visual aids, voice inflection or other group participation.

Be selective. Each teacher is unique, so only use the illustrations that best relate to how YOU tell the story in THIS lesson. Too many illustrations can be confusing, so eliminate any that cover other stories or details you do not wish to emphasise in this lesson.

Click here for visual aids and more storytelling methods.

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Review and Reflection Questions:

Review questions help children remember and know the facts of a story. Reflection questions encourage them to internalise the meaning and implications for their lives. Asking at least one of each type of question can help strengthen a child's spiritual development and help them connect to God. Click here to learn more about review and reflection questions.

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Review:

- Who was John the Baptist related to? (Jesus was his cousin)
- What kind of food did John the Baptist eat in the wilderness? (Wild honey and locusts)
- What was the main message that John the Baptist preached? (Repentance)
- What does "repent" mean? (It means being very sorry for the wrong things you have done, to stop doing wrong, and to start doing right)
- Who was John the Baptist preparing the people to hear from? (Jesus)
- Why did the people need to have soft, repentant hearts? (So they could hear and obey Jesus' message)
- What did John invite people to do after hearing him talk about repentance? (Be baptised)
- What kind of person must repent? (Everyone)
- What question do you have for God about this story?

Reflection:

- What part of the story did you find most interesting?
- What is something you wonder about in this story?
- What do you think John looked or smelled like from living in the wilderness?
- Do you think it was easy or hard for people to hear and obey John's message to repent?
- Is it easy or difficult to hear that you are doing something wrong and need to change?
- How do you think the people felt when they decided to repent and be baptised?
- If you were John, would you have been brave enough to preach about repentance? Why or why not?
- Do you have a "soft heart"- a heart that wants to listen to God and change things He asks you to? Or a "hard heart"- a heart that does not want to listen to God or change?
- What is something that God wants you to repent of?
- What do you want to repent of? (suggestion: have prayer or discussion time about things the children want to repent of and how they could start living instead)

Prayer:

It is important to guide children in learning how to pray. In prayer, children can connect with God and learn that He hears and answers them. God can become a lifelong friend who is with them every moment of their lives. Try using a variety of prayer methods from time to time so that the children can learn to connect with God in different ways. Note that you can pray at any time throughout your lesson. A variety of prayer methods are found here.

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Song Suggestions:

- He's Still Working on Me Song
- I Can Be a Missionary Song
- I've Got the Joy, Joy, Joy, Joy Song
- Refer to the Song Page on this website for more song options.

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Activities and Crafts:

- How to choose the best learning activities for my teaching situation.
- Visit the activities and songs pages for additional activities and crafts.

Activities:

- Make honey sandwiches. To discuss John the Baptist, you might want to put candy "bugs" (like gummy grasshoppers) inside the sandwich. That will be a fun surprise. You could also use plastic locusts (bugs), but be sure no one swallows one!!
- Explain that our behaviour reflects what is in our hearts. Repenting means changing our behaviour. For this activity, individuals or pairs prepare and then act out a bad behaviour (like throwing a fit or stealing something). When the group calls out "REPENT", the actors will change their behaviour and act out how to do good.
- Make any craft using a heart shape (paint, dough, sewing, paper cut-outs, etc.) Soft heart-shaped cookies would be yummy.
- As appropriate to your situation, discuss things you used to do and have now repented of. This should be age-appropriate for the children in your group. Do not glorify it in any way. Talk about your sorrow and the consequences of the sin and compare that to the joy and consequences after repentance.

Invite the children to respond to this story using the adaptable "God's Story" printable reflection page. Free printables for this story.

Crafts:

- Use salt dough (or any clay) to make hearts. Before you begin, bake some of the hearts to show what a "hard heart" is like. Let the children mould and shape hearts out of the rest of the dough. They might add red Tempera paint as a colour. Talk about how soft the hearts are and how they can be easily changed. Compare their hearts to the hard, baked hearts. God wants us to have soft hearts so he can change them to how they should be.

Print and use these free bookmarks, trading cards or timelines. Free printables for this story.

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Other Online Resources:

- Colouring pages and worksheets about John the Baptist (Calvary Curriculum)
- Colouring pages and worksheets about John the Baptist at the end of his life (Calvary Curriculum)
- Craft: Doorknob hanger (Sunday school crafts)
- Teaching repentance: Excellent video teaching a simple way to describe repentance (connectedfamilies.org)
- Teaching repentance: Article about teaching children about repentence and forgiveness (Focus on the Family)
- Teaching repentence: A child’s 5-step guide for repentence (from Happy Home Fairy)

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