

ADAM HAMILTON

Author of *Creed*, *The Walk*, and *The Journey*

PREPARE
THE WAY
FOR THE
LORD

 ADVENT 

AND THE MESSAGE OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

— YOUTH STUDY —

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by Josh Tinley

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Prepare the Way for the Lord
Advent and the Message of John the Baptist
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INTRODUCTION

Each year on Christmas Eve, Christians around the world read aloud, or hear, the story of Jesus's birth from the second chapter of Luke's Gospel. This chapter that tells us about the census that sent Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem, the host of angels singing praises to God, and the shepherds who hurried to Bethlehem to meet the new Christ Child.

This story of Jesus's birth is one of the most famous passages in the Bible, but it is also the second chapter of Luke. The author of Luke doesn't start with Jesus's birth, or even the announcement of Jesus's birth. He starts with John the Baptist.

John the Baptist was born to Elizabeth, a relative of Mary, and Zechariah, a priest in the Temple of Jerusalem. Like the birth of Isaac in the Book of Genesis, John's birth was a miracle unto itself. His parents were elderly and assumed that they were well past their childbearing years. John grew into a famous prophet who traveled through the desert of Judea and baptized people in the Jordan River "to show that they were changing their hearts and lives and wanted God to forgive their sins" (Luke 3:3).

Luke is not alone in emphasizing John the Baptist. All four Gospels tell how John paved the way for Jesus Christ. The fact that John is such a key figure in all of the biblical Gospels tells us that the early Christians thought he was really important and that we can learn something from his teaching and his example.

In this study, we'll do exactly that. We'll examine John's story and message as it appears in the Gospels, based on Adam Hamilton's book *Prepare the Way for the Lord: Advent and the Message of John the Baptist*. We'll learn about John's family and his relationship with Jesus. Most importantly, we'll consider what John has to say about our lives and how we, like him, can prepare the world for Christ.

The study includes the following sessions:

Session 1: The Annunciation: "God Has Heard Your Prayers"

We'll look at the world in which John was born and meet his parents, Elizabeth and Zechariah. We'll also consider how God answers our prayers.

Session 2: Pregnancy, Birth, Circumcision, and Zechariah's Prophecy

We'll look at Zechariah's response to the news he would be a father and the period of silence that followed. We'll also explore what we can learn from the meaning of the names John and Jesus.

Session 3: John's Ministry and Preaching

We'll look at John's career as someone who practiced a baptism of repentance and the forgiveness of sins.

Session 4: Witnesses, Testifying to the Light

We'll look at how John's career gave way to Jesus's ministry and discuss ways that we can reflect Jesus, the light of the world.

Using This Resource

This study can be used in Sunday school, during evening youth fellowship gatherings, or as part of a small group or midweek Bible study. All session plans include:

- A few learning objectives that leaders can focus on as they facilitate activities and discussion.
- A list of supplies that you will need for each session.
- An opening activity and prayer.
- A list of discussion questions, many with references to scripture.
- Closing discussion questions and a closing prayer.

These sessions involve few supplies. Most only require the following:

- Bibles
- Pens or pencils
- Paper
- A whiteboard or large sheet of paper
- Markers

SESSION

1

THE ANNUNCIATION: “GOD HAS HEARD YOUR PRAYERS”

Lesson Objectives

- Explore the world into which John the Baptist was born and get to know his parents.
- Discuss how God hears and answers our prayers, even if God does not answer us in the way we want or expect.
- Consider how God works through both the very old and the very young.

Supplies

- Bibles
- A whiteboard or large sheet of paper
- Markers
- Note cards
- Pens or pencils
- Materials for the “Prepare Your Space” activity. This could include poster paper, construction paper, cardboard, modeling clay, and a small Christmas tree with white lights.

Opening Activity: Good Surprises

As participants arrive, ask them to describe on a note card or slip of paper the most surprising good news they’ve ever received. (Maybe they made a team or were accepted into a program that they really wanted to be a part of but weren’t sure they’d be selected for. Maybe they got a gift for their birthday that they really wanted but didn’t think they’d actually get.) Inform participants that whatever they write will be read aloud to the entire group.

When most participants are present and have had a chance to write about their surprising good news, collect their note cards and shuffle them. Read aloud each card, then have the group vote on who wrote that card.

Then discuss:

- What made your good news so surprising?

- Did any of you have to wait for a long time before getting that news? If so, how long did you have to wait?
- Were there times when you assumed that this good thing would never happen? If so, what gave you hope during these times?

Open the session with the following prayer or one of your own:

Lord, thank you for bringing us together for this study of your messenger, John the Baptist. Open our hearts and minds that we might learn from you, through scripture and through one another. Amen.

Discussion

Have a participant read aloud Luke 1:5-6.

- What do these verses tell us about Elizabeth and Zechariah, parents of John the Baptist?
- Verse 5 says, "Elizabeth was a descendant of Aaron." What do you know about Aaron? (As needed explain that Moses was Aaron's brother and a chief priest of the ancient Israelites. Later priests of Israel were descendants of Aaron. You might also note that Zechariah "belonged to the priestly division of Abijah," an order of priests who helped reestablish the Temple in Jerusalem after God's people returned from exile in Babylon. In other words both of John the Baptist's parents had very respectable ancestors.)
- Have a participant read aloud Luke 1:7. This verse tells us that Elizabeth was unable to have children. What other biblical women do you know of who were unable to have children? (The most famous example is Sarai, later known as Sarah, in Genesis 12–21. She gave birth to Isaac at the age of ninety. Another well-known example is Hannah in 1 Samuel 1:1-20. Hannah, who thought she would be childless, begged God for a child and promised to give her child "to the LORD for his entire life," verse 11.)
- In biblical times, infertility was not well understood. When a woman couldn't have children, people sometimes assumed that God was punishing her or that it was the result of sin. In what ways do we, still today, judge or criticize people for things that are beyond their control?
- Luke 1:11-12 tells us that an angel appeared to Zechariah while he was working in the Temple. What comes to mind when you think of an angel? (As needed explain that the word *angel* literally means "messenger." There are many descriptions of angels in the Bible, none of which involve two wings, a white robe, and a halo. Many angels just look like normal people.)
- Zechariah was frightened when he saw the angel. How, do you think, would you respond if an angel appeared to you?
- The angel told Zechariah not to be afraid, then delivered incredible news: Elizabeth would be giving birth to a child. When has someone told you something that sounded too good to be true? How did you respond?

Have a participant read aloud Luke 1:13-18. How does the angel describe the son who will be born to Elizabeth and Zechariah? How does Zechariah respond to the angel?

- The angel tells Zechariah that his prayers have been heard and that they will be answered. How has God answered your prayers?
- When have you wondered if God has heard your prayers? How do you respond when God doesn't answer your prayers in a way that you expect, or when God doesn't seem to answer your prayers at all? (This can be a difficult question, especially for those who have lost a loved one to a chronic illness or who have dealt with poverty or food insecurity. Sentiments such as, “God works in mysterious ways,” or, “God has a plan,” aren't always helpful. Assure participants that God isn't the one causing illness or disaster or poverty and that God is always at work through God's people to bring healing and wholeness.)
- In scripture, we see a lot of examples of God answering prayers in big ways—performing miracles, healing illnesses and injuries, influencing political leaders. Should we expect God always to respond to prayers in big ways? Why, or why not?
- How might God work through you to answer the prayers of others?
- Luke 1:7 tells us that Elizabeth and Zechariah were very old when they became parents. God works through people of all ages and often calls older adults. How have you seen God at work through older adults in our congregation and community?

Activity: Prepare Your Space

Have a participant read aloud Luke 1:17, in which the angel describes Elizabeth and Zechariah's son and what he will do. The angel says that John will “make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

Say something like: “In Jesus's day, when a ruler would visit a city or territory he or she would send a messenger beforehand who would prepare the people for the ruler's visit. John's purpose was to prepare people for Jesus. The Advent season is a time of preparation. We prepare ourselves to celebrate Jesus's birth; we prepare to encounter Jesus in our lives today; and we prepare for Jesus's promised return.”

Explain that, in honor of John the Baptist's mission, and in honor of Advent, you will be preparing your meeting space for Christ.

Instruct participants to “prepare” your space by doing some or all of the following:

- Create a “Wall of Answered Prayer.” In this session, you considered how God answers our prayers (often in ways we don't expect). Each week during this study, have participants reflect on how their prayers have been answered since your last meeting and write about these answered prayers on sticky notes that they can place on the “Wall of Answered Prayer.”
- Decorate your space with pictures and symbols that remind you of God's presence. This might include a picture or symbol of the angel who announced the births of Jesus and John the Baptist or a picture or symbol representing the waters of baptism.

- Make an Advent wreath. For this you will need five candles, something to hold the candles, and greenery for decoration. Four of the candles should be blue or purple (though sometimes the candle representing the third Sunday of Advent is pink, symbolizing God's joy). The fifth candle, which will go in the middle, should be white.
- Decorate a Chrismon tree. A Chrismon tree is a type of Christmas tree decorated entirely with white lights and symbols representing Christ. These symbols can include a cross, the ICHTHUS (the fish), the Greek letters alpha (A) and omega (Ω), the trefoil representing the Trinity (do an Internet search if you aren't familiar with this symbol), a chalice (representing Christ's blood in Holy Communion), or a shepherd's crook (like a candy cane). You may craft the symbols out of modeling clay, cut them out of paper or cardboard, or create them by bending and twisting pipe cleaners. Symbols should be white or gold, the colors of the Christmas season.
- Represent your journey through this study. Have participants each trace a shoe on construction paper and cut out four foot shapes from the paper. At the conclusion of each session each participant should write on one foot shape a goal for the coming week. Goals may include reading a chapter of scripture each day, writing a letter of thanks to someone who has had a positive impact on a participant's life, or finding at least one small way to help another person each day. Tape these feet on the wall so that they make a path.

After preparing your space, bless your space with a prayer such as this one:

God, thank you for this space where we can gather for learning and worship. As we join together each week, remind us of how you are present with us in this room and in the time we have with one another. We pray these things in Jesus's name. Amen.

Closing

Discuss:

- What is one thing you learned during our time together that you didn't know before?
- What is one thing that you will do in the coming week as a result of what we learned or discussed?

Close with the following prayer or one of your choosing:

God, thank you for bringing us together for this time of study and discussion, and thank you for the work you began through Elizabeth and Zechariah many years ago. We know that, through you, all things are possible. Open our hearts and minds, eyes and ears, to all the ways you are at work in our world this week; in Christ's name we pray. Amen.

SESSION

2

PREGNANCY, BIRTH, CIRCUMCISION, AND ZECHARIAH'S PROPHECY

Lesson Objectives

- Look at Zechariah's reaction to the news that Elizabeth would give birth to a child.
- Identify the people who have been there to support you throughout your life and faith journey.
- Examine God's grace and discuss ways that we can show this grace to others.
- Consider the power of silence and what we hear and notice when we allow ourselves to be silent.

Supplies

- Bibles
- A whiteboard or large sheet of paper
- Markers
- Note cards
- Pens or pencils
- Paper

Opening Activity: "Trust Me"

Supplies: slips of paper, a hat or bag

Beforehand write numbers on slips of paper, fold the slips, and place them in a bag or hat. As participants arrive, have each person draw a slip and unfold it, without showing anyone else. Explain that anyone who draws an even number should think of a true story from their life that others in the group would not know and might not believe. Anyone who draws an odd number should make up a false story about themselves that others in the group might believe is true.

When most participants are present, invite each person to tell his or her story. The goal is to tell the story in a way that will be believable. Allow others in the group to question the person telling the story; the storyteller should insist he or she is telling the truth.

After each person tells his or her story and answers any questions, the group should vote on whether or not they believe the story. See which participants are able to fool their peers with a false story. Also see which participants come up with a true story that is so unbelievable that people think it's false.

Discuss:

- When the angel told Zechariah that Elizabeth would be giving birth to a child, his reaction was to ask, "How can I be sure?" Who are the people in your life whom you always trust and can always "be sure" of?
- When you hear something that seems unbelievable, how do you determine whether you will trust that information?

Open the session with the following prayer or one of your own:

Lord, thank you for bringing us back together to continue this study of your messenger, John the Baptist. Open our hearts and minds that we might learn from you, through scripture and through one another. Amen.

Discussion

Read aloud Luke 1:18-20.

- How does Gabriel react when Zechariah asks, "How can I be sure of this?" Do you think that what Gabriel did to Zechariah was fair? Why, or why not?
- Would you consider what happened to Zechariah a punishment? Why, or why not?
- Zechariah had to remain silent throughout Elizabeth's pregnancy. What is the longest amount of time you have remained silent?
- When is it good to be silent? What sorts of things do you miss when you aren't silent?

Read aloud Luke 1:39-45.

- Mary has just learned that she, like her relative Elizabeth, is pregnant. What does Elizabeth say to Mary?
- Who are some people in your life who have been there to support you during big moments?
- What are some things you could do or say to support someone who is going through a major life event (such as graduating, moving, starting a new job, going to college, and so on)?
- The name John, or *Johanan*, means, "The Lord is gracious." What does this name tell us about John and about his parents, Elizabeth and Zechariah?
- The name Jesus, or *Yeshua*, means, "The Lord saves." What does this name tell us about Jesus?
- What do you know about the meaning of your name, or why your name was chosen? What, if anything, does your name say about you?
- When Christians talk about grace, we're referring to the love and compassion that God has for us, regardless of whether we have done anything to deserve it. Because of this grace, we know that God forgives our sins and wants to live in relationship with us. How have you experienced God's grace?

- John prepared people for Jesus Christ. One way we prepare people for Christ is by showing them God's grace. How do you (or could you) show God's grace to the people you interact with? How do you show them God's love and compassion?
- Read aloud Luke 1:67-79. These verses are a song, or prophecy, from Zechariah. What does Zechariah say about God in this song?

Activity: "You Will Remain Silent"

Supplies: Bibles, papers and pens or pencils

Make sure that each participant has paper to write on and a flat writing surface.

Say something like: "When Zechariah voiced his disbelief about Elizabeth being pregnant, the angel Gabriel tells him that he will be unable to speak until the baby is born. On the surface, this seems like a punishment, but in some ways silence is a gift."

Instruct participants to spend five minutes in silence, listening. Have them write down anything they hear.

After five minutes, invite participants to read aloud what they wrote down.

Then discuss:

- Which of the things on your lists would you not have noticed if you hadn't been silent?
- What are some things we might miss out on if we don't take time to be silent?
- How difficult is it for you to be silent? What is most challenging about silence?

Have several participants take turns reading aloud Luke 1:78-79. Make sure that everyone hears these verses at least five times. This scripture is part of the song, or prophecy, that Zechariah delivers after he is able to speak. As these verses are read, all participants should listen for a single word or phrase that seems especially significant to them.

Invite participants to reflect silently for one minute on whichever word or phrase they identified.

Then discuss:

- Which word or phrase did you identify?
- What, if anything, came to mind as you reflected on this word or phrase?

Then give participants another minute in silence. During this minute, they should not think about anything but should open themselves to whatever message God may have for them.

Discuss:

- How difficult was it to empty your mind and open yourself to God?
- How did you experience God in this time of silence?
- When you pray, how much of your prayer time is spent talking to God? How much is spent listening?
- What do we miss out on when we don't take time to be silent and listen?

Closing

Discuss:

- What is one thing you learned during our time together that you didn't know before?
- What is one thing that you will do in the coming week as a result of what we learned or discussed?

Close with the following prayer or one of your choosing:

God, thank you for bringing us together for this time of study and discussion, and thank you for the grace you offer us through Jesus Christ. Work through us so that we can show your grace to others. Open our hearts and minds, eyes and ears, to all the ways you are at work in our world this week; in Christ's name we pray. Amen.

SESSION

3

JOHN'S MINISTRY AND PREACHING

Lesson Objectives

- Examine the meaning of baptism.
- Explore the concepts of forgiveness and repentance.
- Consider the ways that we, as God's forgiven people, bear "fruit."
- Discuss John the Baptist's mission and purpose and his connection to the prophet Elijah.

Supplies

- Bibles
- A whiteboard or large sheet of paper
- Markers
- Note cards
- Pens or pencils

Opening Activity: I Wanna Know More

Supplies: note cards and pens or pencils

As participants arrive, hand each person a sheet of paper or note card and ask them to think of people from history whom they would like to know more about.

Once they have thought of someone, participants should write down three or four questions about this person that they would like answered.

When most participants have arrived and have had a chance to think of a person and write down some questions, invite each person to say whom he or she chose and read aloud his or her questions.

Then discuss:

- If you wanted to find answers to some of these questions, could you?
- Which of your questions do we have no way of answering?

Say something like: "Today, we know almost everything about public figures. Many leaders and celebrities use social media to tell us what's on their minds and what they're up to. Media outlets devote countless hours to coverage of the lives and words of powerful and influential people from all walks of life. This wasn't the case in ancient times. There was no photography and no way to print and distribute copies

of writings. Most people couldn't even read and write. As a result, we don't have a lot of information about ancient people, even those who made a big impact on history and culture."

Ask:

- What do you know about John the Baptist?

Say something like: "John the Baptist is an example of an important ancient person whom we don't know much about. Luke introduces us to John's parents. The Gospels give us a brief description of John's message and ministry, they tell us a little bit about his disciples, and they describe his death. But there's a lot we don't know about John. In this session, we'll see if we can get a better idea of who John was and what his ministry was all about."

Open the session with the following prayer or one of your own:

Lord, thank you for bringing us back together to continue this study of your messenger, John the Baptist. Open our hearts and minds that we might learn from you, through scripture and through one another. Amen.

Discussion

Invite discussion of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Use the discussion of Qumran and the Essenes in Adam Hamilton's book, *Prepare the Way for the Lord* (pp. 70-78), to help provide background. Ask:

- Have you heard of the Dead Sea Scrolls? If so, what do you know about these documents?

Say: The Dead Sea Scrolls were found in the Judean wilderness, where John lived, and may have been written by a group called the Essenes. John may have been part of this group. The Essenes, like John, were known to "Prepare the way for the Lord" (Luke 3:4) through lives of simplicity and sacrifice.

- How do you prepare yourself for Christ through the way you live your life? (In other words, what sorts of things do you do because of your faith? What sorts of things do you not do? What sacrifices do you make?)
- John and the Essenes baptized people for the forgiveness of sins. How would you define *forgiveness*?
- How does knowing that God has forgiven your sins affect your life and your faith?
- In many translations of the Bible, John tells the people of Judea to repent. How would you define the word *repent*? (Or, what comes to mind when you hear that word?)
- Typically we think of repentance as admitting wrongdoing and asking forgiveness. But the original Greek word has a deeper meaning. It involves a complete change of heart and behavior. When has something caused you to change the way you think or feel?
- When have you made a decision to change your behavior and act differently? What led you to this decision?

- John says to his audience in Matthew 3:8, “Produce fruit that shows you have changed your hearts and lives.” What do you think John means by this?

One of the best-known scriptures about bearing fruit is Galatians 5:22-23. Invite a volunteer to read this passage aloud.

- How have you seen people produce “fruits” such as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control?

Read aloud Luke 3:11-14.

- What does John say when people ask him what they should do to produce fruit? What are some ways that you can follow John's instructions in these verses?
- By baptizing people in the Jordan River, John recognized that people were loved and claimed by God and that their sins were forgiven. If you have been baptized, what do you know or remember about your baptism? If you have not been baptized, what questions do you have about baptism?
- What are some different ways that Christians perform baptisms? (Answers might include full immersion, pouring water, sprinkling water, dipping a hand in water and placing it on the head, making the sign of the cross in water, and so on.)
- What do you know about different ways that Christians understand baptism? (*Some Christians baptize anyone regardless of age; others will only baptize those who have reached a certain age or maturity level. Some Christians will re-baptize those who have already been baptized; others believe that, regardless of the circumstances of one's baptism, the work of the Holy Spirit in baptism was sufficient and the sacrament should not be redone.*)
- How would you answer the question, “Why do Christians baptize people?” (*Answers may vary, but it's important to recognize that baptism is an outward symbol of God's grace and a sign that God claims the person being baptized.*)

Activity: The Press Demands Answers

Supplies: Bibles, paper, and pens or pencils

Discuss:

- What do you know about the prophet Elijah? Are you familiar with any of the stories about Elijah from the Old Testament?

Say something like: “We read about Elijah in the books of 1 and 2 Kings. He was a prophet in the Kingdom of Israel who challenged Israel and its leaders to remain faithful to God and often came into conflict with King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. At the end of his career, Elijah was taken into heaven in a windstorm. Because of the way he left the earth, some Jewish people believed that Elijah would one day return.”

Ask a participant to read aloud Malachi 4:5-6. Explain that these verses were written several centuries after Elijah lived. Discuss:

- What does the prophet Malachi say about Elijah's return? What other things would be happening when Elijah returned?

Ask a participant to read aloud Matthew 3:1-4. **Say something like:** "In verse 3, Matthew quotes the Old Testament prophet Isaiah to make the case that John's mission is to, 'Prepare the way for the Lord.' Matthew also describes John's clothing and eating habits."

Ask a participant to read aloud 2 Kings 1:8. Discuss:

- How does this verse describe Elijah?

Say something like: "You'll notice that Matthew's description of John is very similar to the description of Elijah in 2 Kings."

Then ask a participant to read aloud John 1:19-28. Discuss:

- What sorts of questions do the religious leaders ask John?

As a group, re-create this scene from John 1 as a press conference. One participant should play the role of John. At least one person (a leader or a participant) should record a video of your conference. Others will be members of the media, there to ask John questions.

Before conducting the press conference, take about five minutes to come up with several questions the "press" might ask and talk about how John might respond. Start with simple questions such as, "Who are you?" and, "What have you come to do?" Move on to more difficult questions such as, "What do you mean by, 'Prepare the way for the Lord?'" and, "If you aren't Elijah, why do you dress and act like Elijah?"

Then act out the press conference, making sure one person is recording the video.

If you have more than eight participants, divide into teams and have each team do a separate press conference.

Consider showing your video press conference during worship or showing it to adult Sunday school classes or Bible study groups. If possible, post it on your congregation's social media pages. (Make sure you follow your congregation's rules about posting pictures and videos of youth.)

Closing

Discuss:

- What is one thing you learned during our time together that you didn't know before?
- What is one thing that you will do in the coming week as a result of what we learned or discussed?

Close with the following prayer or one of your choosing:

God, thank you for bringing us together for this time of study and discussion, and thank you for the grace that leads to repentance and new life. Transform us so that we might be more like Christ. Open our hearts and minds, eyes and ears, to all the ways you are at work in our world this week; in Christ's name we pray. Amen.

SESSION

4

WITNESSES, TESTIFYING TO THE LIGHT

Lesson Objectives

- Examine John’s statement about Jesus, “He must increase and I must decrease” (John 3:30).
- Learn about John’s ministry and death and how he prepared us for Jesus.
- Discuss how taking a stand for what is right often requires taking risks.
- Consider what it means for Jesus to be the light and how we reflect that light.

Supplies

- Bibles
- A whiteboard or large sheet of paper
- Markers
- Note cards
- Pens or pencils
- A candle
- Something with which to light a candle

Opening Activity: “I Want You to Know About . . .”

Supplies: none

As participants arrive, ask them to think of a person who doesn’t get enough credit for what he or she does. This could be a historical person, an artist, an athlete, a community leader, or anyone else whose work doesn’t get enough appreciation. For the purposes of this activity, participants should not choose Jesus. Ask participants to consider the following questions:

- Why, do you think, is this person overlooked? Why does he or she not get enough credit?
- What do you wish that more people knew or appreciated about this person?
- Is this person underappreciated because he or she is overshadowed by someone more famous? If so, who?

When most participants are present, invite volunteers to name their underappreciated person, explain why they think this person doesn’t get enough credit, talk about what they wish people knew about this person, and say whether this person is overshadowed by someone else.

Then say something like: “One could argue that John the Baptist doesn’t get enough credit. We remember him today mostly as ‘the guy who prepared people for Jesus.’ We don’t really talk about the fact that John was a big deal in his own right. He was so well known and had so many followers that the king considered him a threat. But John would be OK with that. In John 3 some of John’s disciples are worried that Jesus is also baptizing people and gaining a following. John explains that this is what is supposed to happen. He then says, ‘He must increase and I must decrease’ (John 3:30).”

Open the session with the following prayer or one of your own:

Lord, thank you for guiding us through this study of John the Baptist, your messenger, who pointed others to Jesus. Open our hearts and minds as we study John’s ministry, life, and death. Help us to learn from you, through scripture and through one another. Help us to point others to Jesus by the way we live; in Jesus’s name. Amen.

Discussion

Read aloud Matthew 3:11-17.

- What does John say about baptism in these verses?
- What does John say to Jesus when Jesus asks to be baptized? Why, do you think, does Jesus insist on being baptized by John?
- By being baptized Jesus acknowledged that, even though he is God and without sin, he also is fully human—one of us. Why is it important that Jesus lived a fully human life? What does this say about Jesus’s relationship with us?

Read aloud John 3:22-36.

- John tells his followers, referring to Jesus, “He must increase and I must decrease” (John 3:30). What do you think John means by this?
- When is it most difficult to give credit to others instead of drawing attention to yourself?
- When have you been tempted to bring down someone you thought was getting too much credit or attention?
- In what ways do you (or could you) point others to Jesus so that he will “increase”?

Read aloud Luke 7:33-35.

- What do these verses tell us about the differences between Jesus and John the Baptist and how they practice their faith?
- What are some differences in the way Christians practice their faith today?

Read Mark 6:17-29.

- Why is Herodias, Herod’s wife, upset with John?

- John felt that it was wrong for Herod to divorce his previous wife and marry his half-brother's wife, Herodias. Speaking out against Herod's behavior got him in trouble. Who are some other people who have put themselves at risk by taking a stand?
- When have you spoken out against something you felt was wrong? When have you not taken a stand because you were worried about what might happen?

Read aloud John 1:1-8.

- The Gospel of John begins the story of Jesus with these verses. How do verses 1-5 describe Christ?
- What, do you think, does it mean for Jesus to be "the light"?
- How do verses 6-8 describe John and his mission?
- One might say that John's mission was to reflect the light of Jesus. What do you know about light and reflection? What does it mean to reflect light?
- What are some ways that you can reflect the light of Christ so that others can see Jesus at work through you?
- How do you see the light of Christ reflected in others?

Activity: Double Reflection

Supplies: a candle, something you can use to light the candle

This activity works best in a dark space. If need be, move to a different room or cover your windows. (Make sure that, when you do this activity, you adhere to the safety standards of your congregation and denomination. This may involve having an additional adult in the room or allowing some light to come through a window.)

Gather participants in a circle. **Say something like:** "When you look at another person, what you are seeing is the light that reflects off their face and body. All of us reflect light."

Invite participants to take a minute to reflect on ways that people in their lives have reflected the light of Christ.

Then light a candle. Pass the candle around the circle. Whoever holds the candle should hold it in front of his or her face (close enough that it lights the person's face, not close enough that it burns a nose). The person with the candle should name one way that he or she has seen another person reflect the light of Christ. Participants may mention another person in the group, another member of your congregation, someone in their family, or someone they know through school or the community. **They should say something like,** "I've seen [NAME] reflect the light of Christ by [ACTION OR ATTITUDE]."

After the candle has made its way around the circle, close the activity with a prayer of thanks for all the people who have reflected the light of Christ.

Closing

Discuss:

- What is one thing you learned during our time together that you didn't know before?
- What is one thing that you will do in the coming week as a result of what we learned or discussed?

Close with the following prayer or one of your choosing:

God, thank you for bringing us together for this time of study and discussion. As we go from here, give us the courage to decrease so that Christ might increase. Let us be reflections of Christ's light in all that we do; in Christ's name we pray. Amen.