



REVEALED

getting to know the light of the world

Luke 3:15-22 - Spirit & Fire

Lesson Focus

We are called to live into our baptism by sharing in Jesus' mission to heal and save our broken world.

Lesson Outcomes

Through this lesson, students should:

1. Recognize that in Jesus' baptism, he is confirmed as God's Son who will embark on God's mission of redemption and salvation for the world.
2. Recognize that as Jesus has been sent through his baptism, we have been sent through ours.
3. Seek to live into their baptism by finding ways to practically participate in Jesus' mission of redemption and salvation for the world.

Catching Up on the Story

John was the last of many prophets who proclaimed God's message to Israel before Jesus' arrival. For a long time, no prophets have spoken to Israel. John's dress and behavior indicated to those who heard and saw him his status as a prophet; since it had been such a long time since Israel had seen a prophet, he would have caused quite a stir, which was the case. At this time, Israel had been under the oppressive rule of the Roman Empire. The people of Israel often formed armed resistance groups to throw off the yoke of the Romans in an attempt to restore Israel as a kingdom.

John's proclamation that the Kingdom of Heaven is near would have conjured up visions of open rebellion against Rome. Current Jewish thought looked for a visitation of God's wrath that it would fall upon the Gentiles. Instead, John turns the wrath upon the Jews, who will not repent.

Previously, John the Baptist has been proclaiming the good news concerning the coming Messiah. He has also been about baptizing people for the forgiveness of sins so that they might be ready for the coming Messiah and begin to bear good fruit. John is conscientious about reminding his listeners that those who do not begin to bear good fruit will be chopped down and thrown into the fire. John faithfully fulfills his call to prepare the way for the coming Messiah. Jesus will

now make his first public appearance as an adult.

Fire Not Water

John has finished baptizing the people, leaving them in awe and wonderment about his true identity. They wonder if John might genuinely be the Messiah for whom they have waited. John very clearly states that he is not the one they have been waiting for; instead, the one they have been waiting for is about to arrive.

John says that his baptism is one of water for the forgiveness of sins. Baptism was not unknown in John's day. Indeed, it was practiced as a ritual for cleansing and purification. As we understand baptism today, it was not a one-time event but a ritual that could be repeated. However, the coming one will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. Of course, baptism with the Holy Spirit will become significant in Luke's follow-up work, Acts. Because we know how the story continues, we can understand what John the Baptist is getting at.

The Messiah will come, and God's Holy Spirit will fall on those who come to Jesus to cleanse and empower them. John the Baptist's original audience knew of the Spirit of God, which was given to specific people at specific times to accomplish God's saving mission for Israel. In the Old Testament, we are told that the Spirit of God falls on people like Samson, David, Elijah, and Elisha. The one who is coming will give the Spirit to all who believe.

Fire, on the other hand, symbolizes purification and cleansing. It isn't a symbol of judgment and punishment. As we have said, Israel was expecting judgment, and as Luke uses it with John, fire symbolizes sweeping judgment. However, there is a sense here that the judgment that Jesus' baptism will bring will be directed at those who claim to be religious but fail to bear the kind of fruit John and later Jesus will discuss.

In Prison

At this point, we have a narrative break in the action. The chronology might be a bit misleading, but Luke includes this snippet about John the Baptist being locked up by Herod to wrap up this particular storyline so that the focus could shift to Jesus. That Luke has placed this story here does not mean that John gets imprisoned and then released to baptize Jesus. The central part that John has played in the Gospel so far has all but concluded. We now move on to the real star, Jesus.

The Baptism

As we find in Mark and Matthew, we aren't given an exact recount of Jesus' baptism. Luke tells us that Jesus arrives on the scene after all the people have been baptized. We have already heard John say that this Jesus is much greater than him, so much so that John is not worthy to untie his shoes. Again, we do not get John protesting baptizing Jesus as we get in the other Gospels. Instead, the

scene jumps straight to right after Jesus has been baptized. After Jesus was baptized, he began to pray. This seems like an appropriate response to what Jesus has experienced.

We might question why Jesus would need to be baptized. Obviously, Jesus was without sin, so purification was unnecessary. Through his baptism, Jesus publicly declares his commitment to the God of Israel, as he had already done when he declared that God was his Father in his response to Mary when they found him in the Temple (Luke 2:49).

In Luke, prayer often comes right before a significant event is about to take place. As Jesus is praying, something important does happen. The sky splits, and the Holy Spirit comes and rests on Jesus in the form of a dove. Those who witnessed Jesus' baptism and the Spirit's descent would have understood that an opening in the sky and a manifestation like this would have indicated that God was about to act decisively and tangibly through the one on whom the Spirit rested. The Spirit has already been with Jesus, but now those who witness it can begin to understand that something is about to happen.

This revelatory event is not just visual; it's audible as well. As the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus, we are told a voice coming from Heaven was heard saying, "You are my son, the beloved; with you, I am well pleased." The voice of God confirms Jesus' mission and direction. The phrase echoes two Old Testament texts, Psalm 2:7 and Isaiah 42:1-4.

Both passages concern a servant whom God will establish to do God's will and work in the world. The reference would not have been lost on those who witnessed this event. Jesus, through his baptism, marks his commitment and intention to the God of Israel to do his will and work. In response to Jesus' obedience, God affirms Jesus as the one who is expected, the Messiah.

So What?

This Epiphany, we are praying, waiting, and hoping that we'll be able to see and hear what God is saying to us. One of the ways that God opens our eyes and our ears is through baptism. Something happens when we are baptized. Sure, baptism marks our repentance, our turning from our sin and our old way of life, but it is more than that. Baptism not only marks our movement away from sin but also our movement toward something. Some will argue that it marks our move toward purity and holiness as we also seek to allow the Holy Spirit to baptize us. They would be right, of course. We come out of the baptismal waters clean, washed of our sins, and ready to continue walking toward Christ.

Some will also say that in our baptism, we walk toward inclusion in a new family, the family of God known as the church. We have been adopted as children of God. They, too, would be correct. These images are vital for us as we seek to live our

faith. However, as we emerge from the baptismal water, we move toward another thing: our God-given mission.

We stand at the beginning of a brand new year with new challenges and goals. Many of us will create a list of resolutions and goals we want to keep in the coming year. Let us add another: living into our baptism with a sense of our God-given mission.

Our passage depicts Jesus' baptism, and it is in that baptism that we have revealed to us Jesus' identity. We see the heavens ripped open wide. We see the Spirit of God rest on this Jesus to signify that Jesus will indeed be the one who comes to be our rescuer. We hear the very voice of God proclaim that he loves and is well pleased with Jesus.

We do not hear, explicitly anyway, that Jesus' baptism marks the beginning of Jesus' divine mission. Jesus is up to something. It is the same way with our baptisms. We may not visibly see the heavens tear open. We may not see the Spirit of God descend upon us, and we may not hear the words of God himself declare us to be God's sons and daughters, the children he loves and is pleased with, but that does not mean this is not what is happening.

As we emerge from the baptismal waters, we begin our journey. Yes, it is a journey away from sin and the death resulting from our sin, but we also start to take the first steps to fulfill the mission that Jesus gave us. And what is our mission? It is the same mission that Jesus embarked on after his baptism and declared to those gathered in a synagogue one Sabbath day,

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

We'll look at this passage in a few weeks. By virtue of our baptism, we have been anointed to bring good news to the poor, proclaim freedom to those who find themselves enslaved to all sorts of things, and healing to those who are broken in body and soul. Like Jesus, as he began his mission, we will be tested and tried. We will be told that the way of Jesus is not practical and does not work. We will suffer as Jesus suffered. We will go unrecognized as ones who know the truth about the world and how it should work. We might even be called upon to die. But we will be vindicated by the resurrection power of God. As we move into this new year, may we walk toward fulfilling our mission. May we do so knowing that the one who has called us, loves us, is pleased with us, and will help us on our way.

Discussion Questions

Read the text aloud. Then, read the text to yourself quietly. Read it slowly, as if you were very unfamiliar with the story.

1. Why would the people who had come out to be baptized by John have wondered if he was the expected Messiah?
2. How does John differentiate his baptism from the baptism that Jesus will bring?
3. How do you think John understood what it meant to be baptized with "the Holy Spirit and fire?"
4. Fire can symbolize purification and also judgment. John believes that judgment is coming. On whom does he think this judgment will come? How might this be different from what his audience might have hoped for?
5. Luke doesn't give us a complete account of Jesus' baptism. Why do you think this is so? What is Luke's clear focus in his depiction of Jesus' baptism?
6. Why is "the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove" important?
7. God also speaks, affirming Jesus as God's Son, in whom he is pleased. Why is this important for all that Jesus will do in the following pages?
8. Jesus' baptism is a public sending. Jesus is commissioned to go on his mission of redemption and salvation for the world. Is our baptism similar or different from Jesus'? If similar, why? If different, why? What is our mission after our baptism?