

Isa. 40:1–11
Ps. 85:1–2, 8–13
2 Pet. 3:8–15a
Mark 1:1–8

Purifying Preparation

Goal for the Session

Tweens will prepare for Christ's coming by practicing confession, as called for by John the baptizer.

■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on Mark 1:1–8

WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” Judy Yates Siker

What the audience is about to hear/read is good news! It is the good news of God through Jesus, Jesus who is God's anointed, the Christ. This first-century audience of Jesus followers could use good news as they struggled to survive in the years during or just after the Jewish War with Rome (about 66–70 CE).

Clearly, this is not the birth story of Matthew or Luke. No manger scenes derive from this Gospel. Yet, here in the opening lines of Mark we have a “birth story” of sorts. It is good to tell of new beginnings, to tell about a God who breaks into our time with good news.

WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” Christopher R. Hutson

Mark teaches us to see God by looking to Jesus. But to understand Jesus correctly, Mark looks way back to the prophets of Israel. He sees them looking forward in anticipation of God's intervention. When he stands with them and looks as they look, he sees John the Baptist in line with them and looking in the same direction.

We are like the crowds listening to the prophet John, seeking direction for our future. John points us to Jesus, who came so long ago and who for us is yet coming. As in the past, Jesus may shock us when he comes and shows us who we really are before God.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” Lillian Daniel

The second Sunday of Advent is a time to remember the humility that comes with honoring our antecedents. We all have ancestors in our callings, people who prepared the way.

Waiting for the savior is humbling. “I have baptized you with water,” John says, “but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” Thank God, is our advent prayer. Thank God we get to prepare, but Christ gets to do the rest. Thank God we can wait, and trust that he will get here in the end.

NOW WHAT is God's word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” Martin B. Copenhaver

The text is replete with the Advent themes of anticipation and preparation. John draws people from the countryside and from the city, and from whatever occupies them, to consider for a time what it might mean to prepare for the one who is to come.

John the baptizer proclaims that preparation involves repentance and confession . . . facing the truth about ourselves and changing the direction of our lives. This bracing look back that John insists upon is so very different from the kind of nostalgia that always threatens to take center stage during the Advent season in the culture—and sometimes in our churches as well.

FOCUS SCRIPTURE

Mark 1:1–8

YOU WILL NEED

- ☐ blue or purple cloth
- ☐ 4 votive candles
- ☐ matches, if allowed
- ☐ Color Pack 1, 4, 33
- ☐ *Singing the Feast*, 2023–2024; CD player
- ☐ Bibles
- ☐ blindfold
- ☐ Resource Sheets 1, 2
- ☐ pitcher of water
- ☐ shallow bowl
- ☐ small rocks or glass stones

For Responding

- ☐ option 1: Color Pack 3
- ☐ option 2: your church hymnal or worship book
- ☐ option 3: copies of Resource Sheet 2, materials listed; Color Pack 5, 6

God, We Sing

God, we sing with praise
to you,
Light the flame of *hope* anew;
Light this candle, light the
way,
Bring *hope* into our hearts
today.
Jesus, near us as we pray,
Let *hope* be in our hearts
today.

God, we sing with praise
to you,
Light the flame of *peace*
anew; . . .

Focus on Your Teaching

Confession may be good for the soul, but it's not always popular! Sometimes a well-intentioned desire to affirm the worth of each individual leads us to minimize this teaching from the Scriptures: everyone sins, tweens included. As one who ministers with youth, you care about them and want to encourage their healthy development and self-esteem. Talking about sin doesn't undermine that goal. You can model faithful ways of acknowledging that we all fall short of God's expectations. When we admit our sin, we discover how much we matter to God, who sent Jesus to forgive us and save us.

Loving God, help my learners and me humbly confess our sin today and fully rejoice in your merciful gift of Jesus. Amen.

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Before learners arrive, use slips of paper to mark Mark 1:3b ("Prepare the way . . .") and 1 Corinthians 1:9 in a Bible.

As you greet tweens, invite them to arrange the blue or purple cloth on the table, using the same color your church uses in worship during Advent. Place Color Pack 1 on top of it, and put four votive candles on top of the candles in the picture.

Gather the group by playing "God, We Sing" (Color Pack 33; track 8 on *Singing the Feast*, 2023–2024), and welcome learners to the second Sunday of Advent. Ask a volunteer to light the first votive as another volunteer reads aloud 1 Corinthians 1:9, and then to light the second votive as Mark 1:3b ("Prepare the way . . .") is read. Ask the group to sing the first two stanzas of "God, We Sing."

Offer this prayer:

O God, may your Spirit strengthen us to remember Jesus' coming as a baby, to welcome him when he comes again to rule, and to receive him in our lives today. Amen.

Extinguish the candles.

Invite tweens to think about the following questions and then tell stories of their experiences, if they are comfortable doing so:

- ✠ When have you had to tell a parent or teacher about something wrong you've done?
- ✠ How easy or hard was it? What happened?

EXPLORING

Establish a “Point A” and a “Point B” in your meeting space. Ask for a volunteer to travel between the two. Blindfold the volunteer, and then have the other tweens arrange an obstacle course between Points A and B, using materials in the room. For example, they might place chairs, books, or shoes in the path. When the obstacle course is complete, ask the volunteer to walk slowly to Point B. (Stand by to lend a hand, so no harm comes to him or her.) Once the volunteer has traveled the path, discuss:

✠ What obstacles get in the way as we try to be faithful in loving God and others?

Suggest that obstacles we put in our own way are our sins—words and deeds that threaten to damage our relationship with God and with one another. Tell learners that the reading for this Sunday tells about someone who worked to clear away these obstacles.

To the people who went to see John, his physical appearance may have called to mind Elijah, one of ancient Israel’s most famous prophets (see 2 Kings 1:8).

Have learners find Mark in their Bibles. Say that, like the other three Gospels, it tells the story of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. Encourage them to skim through any introductory material to Mark in their Bibles, reporting on key things they learn. Show Color Pack 4, one artist’s idea of what Mark looked like, and offer information from Resource Sheet 2 (Session Resources) as needed.

Recruit three volunteers to read Mark 1:1–8 as a drama: a narrator (vv. 1–2a, 4–6), the prophet Isaiah (vv. 2b–3), and John (vv. 7–8). After the reading, discuss the story:

✠ Mark’s Gospel is about Jesus (v. 1), so why does it begin by introducing John?

✠ In verse 5, the baptism that John offered was a ritual bathing, a kind of physical prayer for God’s forgiveness. What did the people do as part of this baptism?

✠ Some people thought that John might be the Messiah, God’s Savior. How does John respond to this? (vv. 2, 3, 7)

✠ What will be different about the baptism that Jesus offers (v. 8)? How do you understand this difference?

“The connection of baptism with repentance and confession of sins can also be found in the Dead Sea Scrolls. In addition, ritual bathing was practiced in several other Hellenistic religions of the period as a rite of purification” [*The New Interpreter’s Study Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), p. 1805].

Give each learner a rock or glass stone. Invite tweens to sit comfortably and close their eyes. If possible, darken the meeting space. Read again Mark 1:4–5. Invite tweens to imagine themselves going out to hear John preach. Read aloud Resource Sheet 1 (A Clean Confession) at a steady, but unhurried, pace. After the reading, invite learners to place the stones they have been holding into the bowl. Pass the pitcher of water around, asking each one to pour water over the stones. Reassure tweens that God is merciful. During Advent we remember that God sends Jesus to us to wash away our sins. Ponder together:

✠ Why do you think John the baptizer called people to confess their sins? What happens when we confess our sins to God?

EASY
PREP

RESPONDING

Mark the activities you will use:

- 1. Portrait of a Prophet** To continue the discussion of John the baptizer, display Color Pack 3 and invite tweens to comment on it. Challenge them to find details from Mark 1:1–8 represented in this image, and wonder with them what the picture’s other details might signify. (*Note:* The Latin words translate as “Behold the Lamb of God”; see John 1:29–37). Ask: What question would you like to ask John? To what extent does this picture help you better understand John and his mission? Who calls people today to follow God’s ways? Who calls you?
- 2. Prayers of Confession** To explore the significance of confession in Christian worship, turn to prayers or rituals of confession and forgiveness in your church’s hymnal or worship book. Find the words that are used to describe sin. Discuss: How important a part of worship is confession? Why? How is our practice like and unlike that of other congregations and traditions you know about? What, if anything, would you change about how our church practices confession? Ask a volunteer to record the group’s ideas about confession in worship; after the session, give this list of ideas to your congregation’s worship planners. As a group, write a prayer of confession to use during Closing. You might ask if this prayer can be used in your church’s worship.
- 3. All Washed Up!** To help tweens remember that John’s baptism of washing in the Jordan River was an enacted prayer of confession, invite them to make their own soap, following the directions in “All Washed Up” on Resource Sheet 2 (Session Resources). As you work to mold the soaps, wonder together about how God’s forgiveness is like not only a washing, but also a molding. Encourage tweens to use their soap as a physical reminder of God’s cleansing forgiveness or to give it as a gift.

CLOSING

Gather around the Advent wreath and ask a volunteer to light the two votives. Invite learners to put John the baptizer’s message into their own words. Recall that, through John, God calls us to confession. God promises us forgiveness through Jesus. Offer the prayers written in Responding, or this one:

God, you are more patient with us than we are with each other or ourselves, and your mercy is truly amazing. In the strength of your Spirit, turn us from sin and evil and turn us to Jesus, who came to save us. Amen.

Teacher: Go, reach out into the world with words of God’s love and blessing.

All: Amen! (*All clap.*)

Try to have a quick word with every learner as the group departs. Thank learners for coming, and affirm their positive contributions to the session.

A Clean Confession

Imagine that you have picked up this stone from the banks of the Jordan River. It represents the sins you have committed—all the wrong things you have done and all the right things you have failed to do. It represents all the times you have not loved and served God; it represents all the times you have not loved and served other people.

Feel the stone grow heavy as you silently name your sins. (*Pause.*)

Now hear God's words, spoken long ago through Jeremiah: "I am sending a windstorm from the desert—not a welcome breeze. And it will sweep you away as punishment for your sins" (Jeremiah 4:11–12, CEV).

Feel the hot desert wind blow against your face, scraping you with abrasive sand.

Feel the blazing desert sun beat down, exposing you in a bright and terrible light.

But now hear what God also said through Jeremiah: "Jerusalem, there is still time for you to be saved. Wash the evil from your hearts and stop making sinful plans" (Jeremiah 4:14, CEV).

Feel the wind turn gentle and cool.

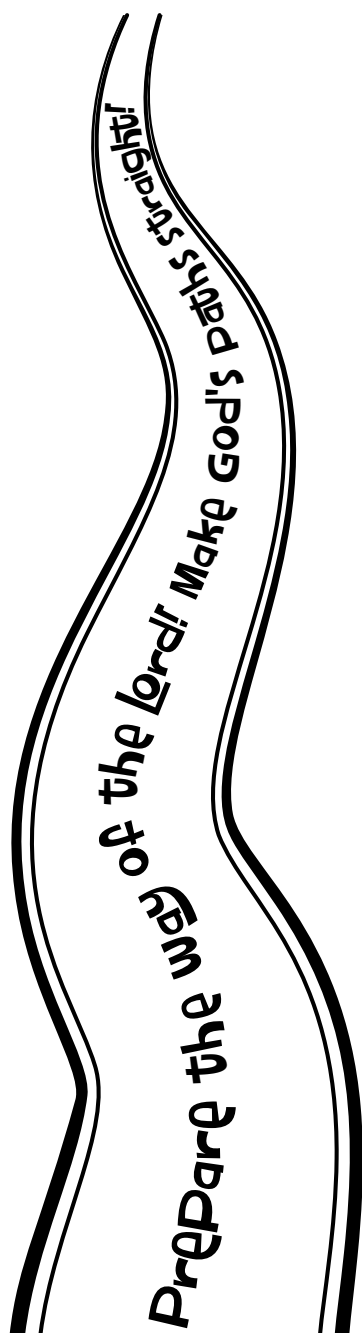
Sense how the sun's rays are no longer God's searing anger, but God's warm embrace.

And hear these words, from Isaiah: "The LORD waits to be gracious to you; therefore he will rise up to show mercy to you" (Isaiah 30:18a). "Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; . . . cease to do evil, learn to do good" (Isaiah 1:16).

Now hear the voice of John, the wilderness preacher: "Prepare the way of the Lord! Make God's paths straight!"

Hear the water flowing in the river. Feel its current swirl around you as John the baptizer lowers you into the water, submerging you. Feel the warmth of the sun as John lifts you into the light again. Feel the water dripping off your head and shoulders.

As you are washed by the water, you are reassured: God will forgive you. God will save you.



Session Resources

Mark

The Gospel of Mark

- Is the shortest of the four Gospels.
- Was the first Gospel written.
- Opens with the words, “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ the Son of God” (Mark 1:1). The word *gospel* means “good news.”
- Was written at a time when the early followers of Jesus were being persecuted, arrested, and even tortured for their faith. The writer probably wanted to encourage the community to keep sharing the story of Jesus, even in the face of danger.
- Has a sense of excitement in almost every sentence. Mark’s account moves quickly with a series of action-packed episodes. Watch for action words like “right then,” “and immediately,” and “at once.” Mark is in a hurry to tell the good news: The Kingdom of God is here. God is with us!
- Gives evidence that Jesus is the Son of God. Mark’s emphasis is on what Jesus did, rather than on his words. Jesus is shown as having power over evil, death, and illness.

You Will Need:

- ☐ soap flakes (such as Ivory Snow® detergent)
- ☐ measuring cup
- ☐ water
- ☐ vegetable oil
- ☐ mixing bowl
- ☐ towels
- ☐ waxed paper
- ☐ food coloring (optional)

All Washed Up!

1. Put 3 cups of soap flakes into a mixing bowl.
2. Add 1 cup of water and, if desired, a few drops of food coloring.
3. Mix the soap flakes and water with your hands. Add more water 1 tablespoon at a time, as needed, until the mixture takes on a dough-like consistency.
4. Rub a few drops of vegetable oil on the palms of your hands, and then shape the soap dough into a familiar Christian symbol, such as a fish or a cross, or a Christmas symbol, such as a star or Christmas tree. You also might look at the symbols of baptism on Color Pack 5 and 6 for ideas. Save Color Pack 5 and 6 for use on Baptism of the Lord Sunday.
5. Place the soap sculptures on waxed paper to dry until next week.

