

ADAM HAMILTON

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

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AND THE MESSAGE OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

— CHILDREN'S LEADER GUIDE —

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by Anita Peebles

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Prepare the Way for the Lord
Advent and the Message of John the Baptist
Children's Leader Guide Download

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INTRODUCTION

This downloadable leader's guide is meant for use alongside *Prepare the Way for the Lord: Advent and the Message of John the Baptist*, by Adam Hamilton. This guide includes four lessons, one for each chapter in the main book. The lessons in this guide, designed for children in kindergarten through sixth grade, require simple preparation and few materials.

The pattern of these lessons is as follows:

- **Lesson Objectives:** Lists the learning goals for the session.
- **To Prepare:** Outlines the teacher's preparation, including gathering materials and making example crafts.
- **Opening Activity:** Welcomes children to the space with care, calling each child by their name. The activity will introduce the lesson's main ideas as well as the scripture focus for the day.
- **Choice of Activities:** Each lesson has two to three activities suggested, ranging from discussions to games to crafts focused on the theme of the day. These activities can each be done in fifteen minutes, so feel free to choose as many or as few as fits the needs of your group.
- **Closing Prayer:** Gathers the children into a circle to close your time together with prayer. Then, as children leave the space, there is a suggested blessing for each week according to the theme.

It is not necessary for you to read all of *Prepare the Way for the Lord* before leading these sessions, but you are encouraged to do so if you can! In this book, Adam Hamilton explores the person of John the Baptist and what we know about him from the Gospels. Though he disappears from the text early in Jesus's ministry, John was an important messenger sent from God, given a special birth story and a ministry focused on calling people to change their hearts and lives. Like John the Baptist, as disciples of Jesus Christ we witness to the Light that is Christ. Like John, we can prepare the way for the coming kingdom of God by showing people through our words and actions a way of living characterized by justice and peace.

John the Baptist came ahead of Jesus to prepare the way for the Messiah. As you teach, know that you have what it takes to guide the children as they learn about how each of us is called to prepare the way for God's kingdom on earth. Approach each lesson with an open mind, open heart, and careful preparation. God will do the rest.

May your fellowship be blessed as you seek to follow Jesus with the children in your care.

SESSION

1

THE ANNUNCIATION: “GOD HAS HEARD YOUR PRAYERS”

Lesson Objectives

- Learn about John the Baptist’s prophesied birth.
- Experience creativity in practices of welcoming.
- Explore what it means to prepare.

To Prepare

Gather materials:

- Note cards
- Markers
- Carpet squares
- Posterboard
- Card stock or blank cards
- Crayons
- Pencils
- Envelopes
- Plain paper

Prepare:

- Write the following on a posterboard in large print:
I am sending my messenger who will clear the path before me. — *Malachi 3:1*

Opening Activity

If you know the names of children who will attend your session, write their names on separate note cards. Before children come into the room, place the note cards in a circle in your gathering space (on a carpet square would be good). When the children enter, greet them by saying, “Hello, NAME, we were expecting you! We prepared a place for you!” and showing them the way to their name card.

- Have several note cards and chairs or squares ready for any child who may be new or a visitor. Write their name when they come in, and show them to a seat.

Once all the children have arrived, invite them to be seated in a circle where their name card is. Go around the circle and welcome each child again by name.

SAY: Before you arrived today, I prepared a place for you. I got ready for you by setting up the circle and collecting everything you need for our time together today. I prepared for you by writing your names on note cards.

ASK: How did you prepare to come here today? How did you get ready for church?

- Prompt them with suggestions if needed, such as: getting dressed, brushing my teeth, eating breakfast, walking or riding to church, etc.

SAY: I am not the only one who prepared for you to arrive! God prepared for you too. God made a place for you in this church, a place only you can fill. This reminds me of how God prepared the world before Jesus was born. Today, let's find out together how God helped the world get ready for Jesus.

Invite a confident reader to read the poster of Malachi 3:1 aloud. Then, invite all the children to repeat it together.

SAY: A long, long time ago, before Jesus was born, God told a prophet that God would send a messenger to God's people. This messenger would help the people get ready to welcome God to earth. In the Gospels that tell us the stories of Jesus's life, we learn that the messenger was a person named John. He was born before Jesus, and he had a special job to do: he had to help the world get ready for Jesus. But even before John could do that special job, John's parents had to get ready for John to be born!

Invite another confident reader to find Luke 1:5-17 in the Bible and read it aloud.

Opening Prayer

Invite the children to pray with you.

PRAY: *Creator God, you welcome all people into your presence. You love us and show us how to live. Thank you for sending John the Baptist to help the world prepare for Jesus. Amen.*

Choice of Activities

Learning from Elders

SAY: God can do amazing things. When Zechariah and Elizabeth thought they were too old to have a baby, God helped them! Then John was born. Zechariah and Elizabeth were surprised because they

thought they were too old to be useful. But God shows us that our elders have a lot to give. Our elders help us learn how to follow God.

ASK: Who shows you how to follow God? How has someone older than you helped you?

Give each child a piece of card stock or a blank card. Have them write or draw a thank-you note to an older person who has helped them. Then, address the envelope.

If you have a group of elders who serve your church regularly, suggest these people as people who could get "thank you" cards.

Send the cards home with the children to give to the people who have helped them, or make plans to deliver them to the people in your church.

Turning Toward God

Invite children to be in a circle, standing if they are able. Tell them that you are about to say an action, and they have to decide if the action helps people turn their hearts toward God or away from God. The children should face you if the action is "toward God" and they should turn away from you if the action is "away from God."

SAY the following actions:

- Push someone on the playground.
- Tell the truth when you break something.
- Help your parents or guardians clean up at home.
- Call someone a mean name that makes them cry.
- Share a hug with someone when they are hurting.
- Write letters to someone in prison.
- Take food away from hungry people.
- Throw a tantrum when you don't get your way.
- Welcome someone to church.
- Clean up a polluted river.
- Ask a public official to end war.

After you finish saying these actions, ask the children to face you again.

ASK: Which actions were easy to know if you were turning toward God or away from God? Which actions were hard to decide on? What is an action that you think turns people toward God? What is an action that you think turns people away from God?

SAY: Before John was born, the angel of the Lord told Zechariah that John would help turn people toward God. We turn toward God when we do things that are kind, generous, loving, peaceful, and just. This is one way John would prepare the way for Jesus.

Prepare the Way Every Day and Everywhere

Give each child a piece of paper and markers. Have them fold the paper in half length-wise (hot dog) and then again width-wise (hamburger), so the result is four quadrants. Then, have each child trace the fold lines with a marker.

SAY: In the Bible, there are many stories about angels appearing to people. Zechariah was in the Temple, going about his work, when suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared to him. Zechariah was so surprised! God had a special message for the angel to give him, even though Zechariah was in the middle of his work. Sometimes we are just doing our normal daily things when God shows up!

Invite the children to think of four places they go in their lives (for example, home, school, church, the car or bus, the playground, and so on).

Have the children draw what God might tell them in each of these places.

SAY: God shows us how to live with love and peace every day. We don't have to be in special places to know God, because God shows up everywhere. God shows up in normal places. God is with us all the time.

Closing Prayer

Invite the children to join you in a circle.

Have the poster with the Malachi verse on it nearby. Invite the children to read the verse aloud again.

Invite the children to pray with you:

PRAY: *God, help each of us listen to you. Show us how we can prepare the way for Jesus. Amen.*

Dismiss the children from the session by offering each child a blessing as they leave.

SAY: NAME, God is with you all the time. Go in peace.

SESSION

2

PREGNANCY, BIRTH, CIRCUMCISION, AND ZECHARIAH'S PROPHECY

Lesson Objectives

- Explore the prophecy about what John would do in his life.
- Consider special names and roles in serving God.
- Practice different methods of communicating a story.

To Prepare

Gather materials:

- Paper
- Water in cups
- Watercolors and brushes
- White crayons

Prepare:

- Cover a table or work space with newspaper or a plastic tablecloth to make a craft area.
- Make a sign that says "Welcome, Everyone!" and hang it at the door of your space.
- Print the following phrase in large, gray print (at least size 22 font) on a plain sheet of (card stock) paper: "Because of our God's deep compassion, the dawn from heaven will break upon us" (Luke 1:78).
- Make an example for the acrostic name poem with the name "John."
 - ◇ Just
 - ◇ Obeys God
 - ◇ Honest
 - ◇ Nature-living

Opening Activity

Welcome children as they enter the space, greeting each child by name.

Invite the children to sit in a circle.

SAY: I am so glad you are here. I prepared this space for you! I made a sign that says “welcome” so you would know that I was ready to greet you.

ASK: How do you greet people? Do you greet different people differently? What is your favorite way to say “hello” and “welcome” to someone?

Invite the children to share different greetings (for example, how you greet your family or friends or teachers or church family may be different; hugs, handshakes, high-fives, smiles, and so on.)

SAY: Getting ready to welcome someone is an important step of preparation. It shows the person that you are excited to greet her or him. In our Bible story today, God prepares the world to greet Jesus by helping Zechariah and Elizabeth get ready for their baby boy. God even told Zechariah and Elizabeth what to name their baby, so he would be known as someone who would prepare the way for Jesus.

Invite two strong readers to read Luke 1:57-64, 67, 76-79 aloud. (These verses are collected in *Prepare the Way for the Lord*, pp. 35-36.)

ASK: When Zechariah prophesied and preached about John, what did he say John would do? (Answers may include: be a prophet, go before the Lord, prepare the way, tell God's people how to be saved, and so on.)

Opening Prayer

Invite the children to pray with you.

PRAY: *Holy God, we praise you for showing us how to live and love. Help us trust you as you show us a path to live with justice and peace. Amen.*

Choice of Activities

Zechariah Charades

SAY: When the angel visited Zechariah, he was so stunned that he couldn't speak! God kept Zechariah silent so that he could practice listening.

ASK: How do you listen? How do others show you that they are listening to you?

SAY: Communicating without speaking can be hard for some people. Let's practice telling Zechariah's story of an angel coming to give him a special message without using our voices.

Divide the children into groups of four and have them practice telling Zechariah's story without using words.

Invite the small groups to share with the large group.

ASK: What was hard about communicating without words? What was easy? How did you decide what actions to use to tell the story?

SAY: Sometimes when we talk a lot, it is hard for us to listen. When we are silent, we have to use other parts of our brains and focus on what we are trying to communicate. When Zechariah was not talking, maybe he focused on God's purpose for his child more.

What's in a Name?

SAY: Names can have special meaning. Before Jesus was born, God told his mother Mary that her baby would be named, "Jesus." And before John was born, an angel told Zechariah and Elizabeth that they should name their child "John," because he would be a prophet.

ASK: Does your name have a story? What are some special names we have heard?

Give each child a paper and markers or crayons.

Have them write their names vertically along the left side of their paper.

SAY: A long time ago, when Zechariah and Elizabeth were alive, many people named children after their parents. It was a tradition to carry on a family name. So everyone was surprised when Elizabeth and Zechariah said that they would name their baby "John." There was no one named "John" in their family! But because the angel had told Zechariah to name the baby "John," Zechariah and Elizabeth knew they had to listen.

Direct the children to write a word for every letter of their name on their paper, like an acrostic poem. Each word should be something that describes them. Show them your example using JOHN.

Dawn from Heaven Will Break Upon Us

Give each child a copy of the paper with the printed quote and a white crayon. Have them trace the words written in gray with the white crayon until it looks like the words disappear.

Have the children paint with watercolors all over the paper. When the watercolors dry, the words traced in white crayon will shine through.

Encourage the children to use colors they associate with "dawn," such as reds, oranges, and yellows.

Closing Prayer

Gather the children back into the circle.

Invite them to share a creation from the activities you did together.

Invite the children to pray with you:

PRAY: *God, thank you for teaching us how to prepare the way for Jesus. Help us do our part every day. Amen.*

Dismiss the children from the session by offering each child a blessing as they leave.

SAY: NAME, you are beloved by God. Go in peace.

SESSION

3

JOHN'S MINISTRY AND PREACHING

Lesson Objectives

- Consider that every person is capable of making mistakes and also of doing good. No matter what, God loves us all the time.
- Explore what it means to focus our hearts on God.
- Prepare to encourage your congregation and community to do God's work of love.

To Prepare

Gather materials:

- Chopsticks
- Tape
- Yarn, ribbon, or string
- 8 ½" x 11" paper
- Markers
- Posterboard
- Chalk
- Paper
- Note cards
- Whiteboard and markers
(or posterboard)

Prepare:

- Write "God loves you all the time" on enough note cards for each child to have one. Place the note cards upside down in a circle as seat markers for when the children come in.

Opening Activity

Welcome the children to the space, greeting each child by name as they enter.

Have the children go to the circle, find a note card, and sit by it without looking at it. Then, when all children have arrived, invite the children to look at their note card.

Invite a strong reader to read the message aloud for the group.

SAY: When I was getting ready to greet you today, there was a message that I knew God wanted me to share with you. That message was "God loves you all the time." Take this note card home with you and keep it as a reminder that no matter what, God loves you.

ASK: How did you get ready to come here today?

SAY: We've been learning about a man named John. He helped God prepare the way for Jesus. John preached and taught and baptized people before Jesus began his ministry. Let's hear about what John did in his ministry.

Invite three strong readers to read the following scripture texts: Luke 1:80; 3:1a, 2b-4; Matthew 3:4-6; Luke 3:7-8 (also found in *Prepare the Way for the Lord*, pp. 67-68).

ASK: What do we know about John?

Make a list of the answers given.

Opening Prayer

Invite the children to pray with you.

PRAY: *God, thank you for giving us people who share loving messages with us. Help us spread your kindness and love in the world. Amen.*

Choice of Activities

Making an Isaiah Scroll

ASK: How do people send messages today? (for example, talking, texting, phone calls, Zoom calls, writing cards, sending memes, and so forth)

SAY: In ancient times, people wrote messages on scrolls. Scrolls were invented before books. The oldest pieces of the Bible archaeologists have found are on scrolls. Sometimes people would put the scrolls in jars to keep them from getting damaged. John knew about some of the ancient writings because they were preserved on scrolls. The prophet Isaiah said some important things that John preached about, especially this prophecy about a Messiah: "A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD'" (Isaiah 40:3 NRSV).

Give each child a piece of paper, two chopsticks, tape, and markers.

Have the children turn their paper sideways (landscape orientation) and write the following verse on their scroll: "A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD.'"

Have the children use tape to attach chopsticks to the ends of their paper, one on the right side and one on the left.

Show the children how to roll up the paper like a scroll so the right and left meet in the middle. Then, have them choose a string, yarn, or ribbon to hold their scroll closed.

X Marks the Spot

Gather the children into a circle.

On a piece of posterboard, draw a heart in the middle of the space.

ASK: How do you think God wants us to act? What kinds of actions and words show God's love to others?

Record the answers on the poster, writing them all around the page, away from the edges of the heart. Do not write them in a straight line, but arrange them randomly. (Answers could be: kind, loving, helpful, generous, give to those in need, go to church, stop climate change, and so forth.)

Invite the children to line up behind each other, all facing the poster.

Give the first child in line a marker. Ask them to close their eyes and then draw an X on the poster where the heart is. Make sure none of the kids are peeking!

- If the children are comfortable, you can help spin them around a couple times to disorient them (like in "pin the tail on the donkey").

For each child, ask them to place an X on different answers written on the poster. (For example, one child will try to place an X on "go to church" but another will try to place an X on "be kind.")

After all the children have had a turn, invite the children to open their eyes and return to their seats in the circle.

Make observations out loud about where the Xs are. Say things like: "Hmmm, sometimes the Xs seem to be in the right spot. But sometimes they are just too far away. Sometimes the Xs are over in a whole other place!"

ASK: What was it like to try to draw an X in a specific place on the poster? What was easy? What was challenging?

SAY: Sometimes it is easy for us to hit the mark and do the right thing, or act how God wants us to act. Other times, we make mistakes, or we get confused, or we just don't know where the "mark" is that we are aiming for. No matter what, God loves us all the time. And if we do make a mistake, we can ask God to forgive us and help us do better. God always gives us a second chance.

A Voice Crying in the Wilderness

SAY: When John was doing his ministry, he was like "a voice crying out in the wilderness." He was trying to get his message out to everyone to change their hearts and lives and to follow God's will.

ASK: When someone wants to tell a lot of people something, how do they do that today? (Answers might include a billboard, newspaper, social media, signs on the side of the road, or others.)

SAY: Early in the COVID-19 pandemic, people put pictures of teddy bears in their windows as a way of encouraging each other. Then, when someone would pass by and see the bear, they would know someone was trying to spread love and kindness in the world. We might not be a voice crying out in the wilderness, but we can still call people to follow God's way of love.

If possible, take your group outside and use chalk to write messages on the sidewalk or pavement. If this is not possible due to your location or weather, use paper and markers to make signs you can put in windows.

Invite children to share the signs and messages they made.

Considering Baptism

The story of John the Baptist baptizing people in the Jordan River can be a good time for talking to children in your care about baptism. Consult with your pastor and/or deacons about how to have this conversation with children according to your church traditions.

Closing Prayer

Gather the children back into the circle.

Invite them to share something they will remember from the activities you did together.

Invite the children to pray with you:

PRAY: *God, help us to focus our hearts on what is good and loving. Remind us that you love us even when we miss the mark. Amen.*

Dismiss the children from the session by offering each child a blessing as they leave.

SAY: NAME, you are a witness to God's love in this world. Go in peace.

SESSION

4

WITNESSES, TESTIFYING TO THE LIGHT

Lesson Objectives

- Explore the concept of Jesus as the Light of the World.
- Discuss the role of “witness” to the Light.

To Prepare

Gather materials:

- Objects that emit light: phone, flashlight, headlamp, lamp, overhead light, candle, match
- Paper plates
- Tissue paper
- Contact paper (or wax paper and clear glue)
- Scissors
- Hole punch
- String
- Book about a brave person (for example, *The Story of Ruby Bridges* by Robert Coles)

Prepare:

- Cover a table or work space with newspaper or a plastic tablecloth.
- Make an example suncatcher.
- Make sure all of your light sources are plugged in or have battery power.

Opening Activity

Welcome all children to the space, greeting each child by name.

When all children have arrived, say something like: “Welcome! I see you, and I am glad you are here.”

SAY: Over the past few sessions we have been learning about John the Baptist and his ministry. He helped the world prepare to welcome Jesus. That's what we are doing in the season of Advent too. We get ready to welcome Jesus into the world.

ASK: How are you getting ready to welcome Jesus?

SAY: In the Bible, there are many names for Jesus. One is "light." We can imagine that Jesus is like the sun, shining on everything and helping it grow. And we can imagine that John the Baptist is like the moon. The moon itself does not shine like the sun, but it reflects the sun's light.

Invite a strong reader to find John 1:1-9 and read it aloud. Direct children to hold up their hands, opening and closing their fists (like a blinking light) whenever the word "light" is read.

Opening Prayer

Invite the children to pray with you.

PRAY: *God, thank you for giving us Jesus, the Light of the World. Thank you for sending John to help the world get ready to welcome Jesus. Help us prepare the way for Jesus today. Amen.*

Choice of Activities

Suncatcher

SAY: John the Baptist did ministry before Jesus began his ministry. But John was not competing with Jesus. John was trying to point to Jesus's ministry and emphasize Jesus's work in the world. John didn't want all the attention because he knew that Jesus was more important.

Show children the example of the suncatcher.

SAY: This suncatcher can remind us of John the Baptist. Just like the suncatcher needs the sun's light to work, John needed Jesus's light. The colors in our suncatcher draw our attention to the light, just as John told people to pay attention to Jesus.

Give each child a paper plate and scissors. Have them cut out the center circle of the plate, leaving just the rim. Turn the rim of the plate over so it is convex on the table.

Show the kids how to cover the opening in the middle of their plate with contact paper, gluing it down on the edges. Make sure to put the sticky side of the contact paper facing up.

If contact paper is not available, wax paper and glue will work well for a surface for the tissue paper to stick to.

Have the children tear up colorful tissue paper and place it on the sticky side of their contact paper.

When they are done decorating the contact paper, punch a hole in the paper plate rim and hang it with a string.

Demonstrate the suncatcher in use by hanging it in a window or in front of a light to see the beautiful colors.

Different Kinds of Light

Gather different kinds of light sources.

SAY: John the Baptist helped the world get ready for Jesus. He told them that he was “testifying to the light.”

Invite the children to observe as you show them different kinds of light.

ASK: Which light is the biggest one? Which one is the best one? Why do you think so? Which light is your favorite?

SAY: These lights are amazing. They help us see when we are inside or when it is nighttime and the sun is not out. These lights all shine, but they shine in different ways. The sun is the greatest light of all—it’s so bright that we can’t even look at it directly!

ASK: How are these lights similar? How are they different?

SAY: The Gospel of John tells us that Jesus is the Light of the World. He is the greatest light. John the Baptist was like one of these lights we have right here: he was a light, but not as bright or great as the light of Jesus. Each of us can be like John, helping shine light wherever we can and pointing the way to the greatest Light of all.

Courage to Speak Up

Find a children’s book in your local library or your church library about someone who did something brave.

ASK: When have you done a brave thing? How did you find the courage to act?

Read the book to the children.

ASK: What was your favorite part of the book? What was the most important part? How was [the character in the book] brave?

SAY: Many people all over the world have spoken up for what is right. They were brave. John the Baptist did a brave thing when he spoke against King Herod. God was with John when he was brave, and God is with us when we do brave things. Being brave and speaking up for what is right is one way we can point to the light of Jesus.

Closing Prayer

Gather the children back into the circle.

Invite them to share something they will remember from the activities you did together.

Invite the children to pray with you:

PRAY: *God, thank you for giving us Jesus, the Light of the World. Help us share his light with the world. Amen.*

Dismiss the children from the session by offering each a child a blessing as they leave.

SAY: NAME, Go in peace to share God's light with the world