

# Possibilities Unfolding

As we enter the Season after the Epiphany, the scriptures invite us to wonder about the unfolding possibilities that are opened to us through the revealing of God's ways in Jesus the Christ. On this Baptism of Jesus Sunday, we hear God's Spirit-filled voice speaking new things into action, reminding us that we are God's beloved children and planting God's purpose in our midst.

## Focus Scripture: Matthew 3:13–17

Reading the verses before this focus text, we learn that Joseph, Mary, and Jesus returned from Egypt and settled in Galilee. As chapter 3 begins, John the Baptizer is preaching in the wilderness of Judea – telling people to return to God's ways and proclaiming that "one who is more powerful than I" (Matthew 3:11) is coming.

Jesus, now an adult, comes to John for baptism in order to "fulfill all righteousness" (verse 15). *Righteousness* in this context means "doing the work that God has given one to do." John's work is to announce the presence of the Messiah and the coming reign of God. In baptizing Jesus, John's mission is fulfilled.

As noted before, the writer of Matthew strives to link the story of Jesus' life with the story of God's people as told in the Hebrew Scriptures. In the stories of the Hebrew prophets, their call from God is important. In this focus passage, the Spirit of God and a voice from heaven reveal Jesus' identity as the Son of God. In Matthew, this is the first direct statement of Jesus' divine identity.

Verse 17 reports "a voice from heaven" describing Jesus as "with whom I am well pleased." Here, the gospel writer creates a connection with the beginning verses of the Servant Song (Isaiah 42). This statement identifies Jesus as God's beloved child and faithful servant.

Verse 16 speaks of the heavens opening suddenly. Imagine the potential and the possibilities that were opened to Jesus at this moment. Jesus ushered in a new era that will not close until the end of time.

To underscore the beginning of this new work of God, the Spirit of God rests on Jesus in the form of a dove. This symbolism may have reminded early Jewish Christians of

the story of Noah. In Genesis 8:10–11, a dove marks the beginning of new life for creation.

God's pleasure in Jesus is announced as Jesus' ministry begins. Obedience to the call of God is a continuing theme in Matthew. The blessings of God, however, are not contingent on behaviour. Rather, such grace is what makes it possible to follow in God's ways.

The voice from heaven that speaks at Jesus' baptism echoes the voice spoken in **Isaiah 42:1–9**. These words proclaim the mission of God's beloved servant to restore justice. Every age in human history has longed for someone like the servant described in Isaiah. It is easy to see how the first Christians would have associated Jesus with this figure.

In **Psalm 29**, the psalmist affirms that God's powerful voice creates, even in the midst of chaos. God speaks at the beginning of creation and at the baptism of Jesus.

As the disciple Peter travelled with Jesus, he learned of the new ways of God's reign. The Spirit that descended on Jesus at his baptism is the same Spirit that is poured out on believers in the book of Acts. In **Acts 10:34–43**, Peter proclaims the cosmic nature of God's plan in Jesus. As the Spirit dwells with Jesus' followers, then and now, it enables the continuing of God's mission.

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In the whoosh of a dove's wings and a Spirit-filled voice, we perceive the vision of God's unfolding purpose in the life of Jesus. When we open our hearts to God, we sense the presence of this dove and the power of this voice to reveal God's unfolding possibilities for us and our world. When have you sensed God's Spirit resting on you, as an individual and as the church? How is your life shaped by being called God's child and faithful servant?



January 9, 2011

**Focus Scripture**  
**Matthew 3:13–17**

**Additional Scriptures**  
**Isaiah 42:1–9**  
**Psalm 29**  
**Acts 10:34–43**

**Holy One, we give thanks that you call us "beloved." Open us to receive your bountiful Spirit as our companion, and inspire us to embrace the life revealed in the unfolding possibilities you place before us. In Christ. Amen.**

If you have Internet access, visit [www.spiritseasons.com](http://www.spiritseasons.com) to access Spirit Sightings for connections between current events and the focus passage.

## The Focus for Ages 5–12

Will all the children in your group have seen a baptism in your sanctuary? With many churches scheduling congregational worship and church school at the same time, children can easily reach adolescence without being present for a baptism. If that is the case for your children, plan a time for them to observe a baptism, even if it is several weeks after this session.

God's words of affirmation to Jesus are

also an affirmation to God's people today. Children deserve to hear these positive words of love and caring often. This story presents one more time for that message to be reinforced. This is also a good time for you to evaluate how you reinforce those words through your actions with the children.

Pray that the children in your group will always remember that they are special to God.

January 9, 2011



### Materials needed

#### Before the session

- ❑ Prayerfully reflect on this week's focus scripture, Matthew 3:13–17, and biblical background material (p. 51). What do you remember or know of your baptism?
- ❑ Bring *basic supply kit* (see "This Season, So..." on p. 2) and, if possible, *Seasons Music CD, vol. 9* and *CD player*. *Seasons .mp3 Downloads* are available for purchase from [www.spiritseasons.com](http://www.spiritseasons.com).
- ❑ Bring songs "I Am Becoming Peace" and "Cosmic Hymn of Praise" and (pp. 4 and 5 in *Music Section*; also #6 and #1 on *Seasons Music CD*).

#### Gather

- ❑ Prepare worship table with *white cloth* for the Baptism of Jesus Sunday, *large white pillar Christ candle*, *long fireplace matches*, *offering basket*, and *Bible*. Place *bookmark* at Matthew.
- ❑ Bring *symbols of membership* in various organizations, such as *library card*, *membership cards*, *family photo*, or *organization's newsletters*.

#### Engage

- ❑ Prepare to tell the story on *today's resource sheet "Jesus Comes to the River."*
- ❑ For echo story group, rehearse the echo story so you can lead the children confidently.
- ❑ For art and poetry group, bring *poster "Word of Light"* and *directions*.

#### Respond

- ❑ **Art zone:** *watercolour paper*, *white crayons or wax sticks*, *watercolour paints*, and *brushes*
- ❑ **Music zone:** *song "The Anointing"* (pp. 8–9 in *Music Section*; also #5 on *Seasons Music CD*)
- ❑ **Outreach zone:** *copies of today's resource sheet "Welcome Postcard"*
- ❑ **Quiet zone:** *recording of quiet, soothing music* and *copies of today's resource sheet "Quiet Prayer Time"*
- ❑ **Baptism zone:** *guest to talk about baptism as practiced by your congregation and denomination*



# Unfolding Possibilities

**Scripture**

Matthew 3:13–17

**FOCUS** To hear with Jesus that we are loved by God.

## GATHER

**Call to learning** Point out the white cloth for Baptism of Jesus Sunday. The Advent wreath has been removed. Left is the Christ candle. Remind the children that the candle is called the Christ candle as you light it.

**Sing** the song “I Am Becoming Peace” (p. 4 in *Music Section*; also #6 on *Seasons Music CD*) together. During the song, have a child receive the offering.

**Pray** this prayer, or one of your own:

God of joy and hope,  
we are thankful  
that you are all around us. Amen.

**Extinguish** the candle as a sign that the opening ritual is over.

**Connecting with the focus**

**Signs of membership** To help the children identify with groups to which they belong, show them the things you brought that indicate groups or organizations to which you belong (library card, family photo, membership card or organization’s newsletter). Perhaps some of the children have their own library cards, school identity cards, or special clothing for scouting groups or other organizations. Ask:

- **What does it mean to be a member of something?**
- **What kinds of things do you do because you belong to (the library) or because you are a member of a group?**

Suggest that they listen for something in the Bible story that is a sign of being part of a group or belonging.

## ENGAGE

**Preparing for the story**

**Matthew’s story of Jesus** Invite a child to get the Bible from the worship table. Explain that each year the church focuses on one gospel. Ask:

- **Whose story is found in a gospel?**
- **What are the four gospels in the New Testament?**

Some children will remember that the story of Jesus is found in the gospels. If they cannot name the four gospels, now is a good time to teach this Bible fact. Even the youngest children can recall Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Then have the child open the Bible to the bookmark and tell what gospel it is.

**The Bible story**

**Baptism of Jesus** Explain that in this session we begin to follow the life of Jesus as an adult. The baby born in Bethlehem is now a man. Younger

children may need this clue to connect the baby in Joseph’s arms with the man at the Jordan River. Tell the story from today’s resource sheet “Jesus Comes to the River,” based on Matthew 3:13–17. At the end of the story, comment that this story is so important that it is told in all four gospels. Just for good measure, lead the children in naming the four gospels in unison.

**Exploring the story further**

To enable the children to explore the story further, according to interests and abilities, explain the two options and have each child select one.

**Echo story group** This group will review the story of Jesus’ baptism by creating an echo story. Explain to the children that you will begin the story of Jesus’ baptism. In the lines you say, they are to repeat the last word each time. Then they will complete the echo story with their own words. Begin with:

Jesus came from Galilee (Galilee).  
 Jesus came to see John (John).  
 John was at the Jordan River (river).  
 John said, "Not me, no" (no).  
 Jesus said, "You, yes" (yes).

Now help the children create more lines to tell the rest of the story. Print the lines they write on newsprint so you can lead the expanded echo story for the others.

**Art and poetry group** The children in this group will think about what it means to be loved by God. Display the poster *Word of Light*. Provide Bibles or copies of Matthew 3:13–17, writing paper, pencils, and these directions:

- 1 Sit where you can look at the poster.
- 2 Take a Bible (or copy of Matthew 3:13–17) and find Matthew 3.
- 3 Read Matthew 3:13–17 silently or with a partner.
- 4 Look at the art poster. What part of the Bible story does it remind you of?
- 5 Take paper and a pencil. Write a short poem or a few sentences about Jesus' baptism.



### The Bible story and us

**Play** the song "Cosmic Hymn of Praise" (p. 5 in *Music Section*; also #1 on *Seasons Music CD*) as the signal to gather together. Invite children from the art and poetry group to read their work. Have the echo story group present their echo story. Make the transition to Respond by noting that the words Jesus' heard are words of good news of God's love for us too.

# 3

RESPOND


Invite the children to select a zone and work with the materials there.

- **Art zone: Wax relief paintings** The waters of baptism mark us on the outside, a symbol of belonging to Christ and being beloved of God. Provide watercolour paper, white crayons or clear wax, and watercolour paints and brushes. Have the children draw shapes and designs, such as water drops, on the paper with the crayons. Then paint over the entire paper with one or two hues of watercolours. Watch the designs emerge. Recall how the waters of Jesus' baptism brought out an important message from God.
- **Music zone: Creative movement** The song "The Anointing" (pp. 8–9 in *Music Section*; also #5 on *Seasons Music CD*) is too much to teach the children, especially in one session. However, they can enjoy the music and gain some understanding of the words. Help them develop simple movements to interpret the refrain of the song. A simple process is to work with phrases and then put the movement to the music.

For example, "Lead us to listen" can be matched with holding a hand cupped behind the right ear and bending the body slightly to the right. For "to hear the heart speak," reverse and hold a cupped hand to the left ear and lean in that direction. The children in this zone can present the movements during the Blessing.

- **Outreach zone: Welcome post-cards** When children or adults are baptized, we welcome them into the church. The group can make postcards using today's resource sheet "Welcome Postcard" to send when there are baptisms or new members join. After adding colour to the picture, write a generic message on the address side of the card, such as "Welcome to our church" or "Welcome to (*name of congregation*)" and sign name of group. Save the postcards to mail as baptisms occur or new members join the congregation.



- ❑ **Quiet zone: Meditative prayer**  Hearing that we are God's beloved is something to contemplate and ponder. This zone will provide a quiet spot for children to do that. Play meditative music, such as "Jesus, Face of God" (#4 on *Seasons Music CD*) or soothing instrumental music if you do not have access to the *Seasons Music CD*. Either have a leader in this zone to lead the meditation or provide the children with copies of today's resource sheet "Quiet Prayer Time" and these directions:

- 1 To prepare for this prayer, take a copy of "Quiet Prayer Time."
- 2 Sit in a comfortable position and listen to the music.
- 3 Read each line on the paper. Do each direction for a moment before reading the next line.
- 4 Take this paper home and pray in this way whenever you wish.



- ❑ **Baptism zone: Guest Baptism**, a sacrament of the church, is practiced in various forms today. Invite your pastor or a church member to talk with the children about the way your congregation and denomination practices this sacrament. If possible, take the children to see the baptismal font or area in the sanctuary.

# 4

**BLESS**

**Gather** Play "Cosmic Hymn of Praise" (p. 5 in *Music Section*; also #1 on *Seasons Music CD*) as the signal to gather in a circle around the worship table.

**Song** The music zone group can present the movements to the refrain of "The Anointing."

**Pray** this prayer, or one of your own:

God, we are so happy that you love and bless us.

May your delight in us and all that you have created shine in us and through all the world. Amen.

**Blessing** To a child next to you, say, "(Child's name), you are loved by God." That child says it to the next child, and on around the circle.



What examples of belonging did the children express? From their conversations, how do you think they feel about belonging to the church?

What questions did the story of Jesus' baptism bring about the sacrament of baptism today? If

some questions linger, what else can you provide for the children?

If the children created movements for the refrain of "The Anointing," save them to use on March 6.



# Jesus Comes to the River

based on Matthew 3:13–17

When telling a story, stand still until  
all eyes are on you. Focus  
on one child as  
you begin.

A steady stream of people came to the Jordan River where John baptized them. People came from all over to hear John preach and to be baptized by him. Important religious leaders came. Roman soldiers came. Ordinary, everyday people came.

When they confessed that they had not followed God's way, John baptized them. He dipped them into the river.

Day after day, this is what John did. But he also reminded the people that God would send someone more important than John. This one would baptize with God's spirit, not river water.

Then one day Jesus came to the Jordan River where John was baptizing people.

When John saw Jesus, John said, "I cannot baptize you. You should baptize me. Really, no, no."

But Jesus insisted. "Yes, John, you must baptize me. God wants this to happen. Yes, yes."

So John agreed. John and Jesus walked into the river. John dipped Jesus into the water just as he had dipped all the other people.

But something happened when John lifted Jesus out of the river. The skies opened up. Jesus saw something like a dove come down. This dove was a sign of God's Spirit.

Then a voice came from high above Jesus, John, and the people. "This is my child whom I love. I am pleased with my child."

This was God's sign to Jesus that Jesus was ready to do the work God had just for Jesus. This work was to show people God's way by the way Jesus lived. But before Jesus could begin, he went to a lonely place to get ready.



# Welcome Postcard

A large rectangular frame containing a postcard template. The top half is a blank area for writing, divided by a vertical line. On the left side of this area, there are four horizontal lines for an address and a small rectangular box for a stamp. The bottom half of the frame is a decorative illustration of a white dove perched on an olive branch, surrounded by other olive branches with olives. The word "Welcome" is written in a cursive font at the bottom of the illustration.

fold

fold



# Quiet Prayer Time

Begin by sitting in a comfortable position. Close your eyes and listen to the music for a few minutes. Then open your eyes and follow these directions. Pause after each one.



Take a moment to breathe deeply.



Feel your breath going in—and out.



Let your body and mind be at peace.



Hear God saying your name.



Hear God telling you that you are loved and blessed.



Imagine God's blessing pouring down over you.



Imagine God's Spirit with you.



Know that you are God's beloved.



Sit quietly for a few minutes. Then stand up.