

# Coming through the Waters

Epiphany can shake the foundations of our faith. We may wonder what to do next. The Season after the Epiphany will offer opportunities to incorporate the new, weave it into the old ways or let go of old beliefs entirely. This week, we focus on the role of the Holy Spirit in the wake of earth-shattering discoveries.

## Focus scripture: Mark 1:4–11

The gospel of Mark opens with the story of John's preaching before Jesus' baptism. Prophets rarely live ordinary lives; Mark's gospel makes it abundantly clear that John was no exception to this rule. Just like the God he serves, he understands how to make something out of nothing. A meal of locusts and honey, a robe of camel hair held together by a belt of leather cord. John used the Jordan River for ritual cleansing so his followers would remain humble. He insists they believe in the power of God to deliver them by way of a forthcoming prophet who wouldn't need water for ritual cleansing. "This prophet will baptize you with spirit!" he proclaims. "You won't need me or this great river!"

Jesus' baptism is just like the baptisms of John's followers until he comes up out of the water. The sky seems to burst. A simple bird becomes the sign of God's presence resting on him. The familiar human they knew as nothing more than a simple man, friend, brother, and teacher is suddenly both son of Mary and Son of God.

**Genesis 1:1–5** Humans around the world have many accounts of the origins of peoples, places, problems. Genesis is a mysterious text that offers more than one story of creation. It begins with God creating something out of nothing by sorting things out. In this story, the very first act is to make a way for darkness and light to know their names and know their places. Darkness is called night and light is called day.

As if Genesis weren't poetic enough, **Psalm 29** offers a satisfying hymn about the voice of God moving across water, earth,

fire, and people for the sake of blessing it all with God's presence. This voice calls forth the glory of trees and entire civilizations; it is the cause and control for much of what we experience. The passages work together this week to set the scene for stories of human encounters with the voice that orders the chaos around and in God's people.

In **Acts 19:1–7**, Paul has found a small group of Jesus' disciples who have not been taught about the comfort of the Holy Spirit. Paul offers a simple explanation that links the baptism of Jesus to the baptism of all believers. He offers them a new way to experience repentance and prophesy. They are baptized into the Holy Spirit, and it is as if they feel a new order. They seem to have a new relationship with each other, Christ's story, and to all of creation. Paul teaches that there is something more significant than the ritual cleansing for repentance. There is an added element, the Holy Spirit that makes us behave as part of a new creation, a new covenant.

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Simple aspects of nature are put into new order when God speaks through them, and there are new identities for ordinary people when the spirit of God is evident in or through them. It is as if the passing season has shed new light on old questions about who we are and how we will behave. The Season after the Epiphany offers us a time to explore this as a call from old habits and into a fresh start. How will you respond to the needs of the people and planet in this Season after the Epiphany?



## Focus scripture

**Mark 1:4–11**

## Additional scriptures

**Genesis 1:1–5**

**Psalm 29**

**Acts 19:1–7**

**God of ancient knowledge and overwhelming truth, we seek understanding and patience as daily we realize we live in the depths of mystery and cannot know who we are until we learn more about who you are. Amen.**

## Lecton Connection

links current events with this week's scriptures. Go to [www.seasonsonline.ca](http://www.seasonsonline.ca) and click on the link.

## The Focus for Ages 5–12

Most children, even the youngest members of your group, have experienced many beginnings. They have started school, joined a church school group, perhaps learned to ride a bicycle or moved to a new house or city. Some may have experienced more dramatic changes and new beginnings, such as changes in family dynamics. Although children sometimes feel somewhat apprehensive when faced with significant changes, they are usually eager to try out new things and enjoy the process of learning. This week's conversation in Gather will help them recognize changes they have experienced. These changes will be their way

to connect with the story of Jesus and the new beginning that began with his baptism.

Baptism occurs differently in our congregations. Some children in your group may remember their own baptism, or that of a sibling, or they may have seen a baptism during a worship service. In your discussions, be sensitive to the fact that not all children have been baptized and some may have questions about this. This week's session offers a chance to talk about what baptism means and to affirm that all people, whether they are baptized or not, are loved and cherished by God. Pray that the children will know that they are beloved by God.

### Prepare

#### Before the session

- ❑ Read and prayerfully reflect on this week's focus scripture, Mark 1:4–11, and [biblical background material](#) (p. 51). Review the article "[The Gospel According to Mark](#)" (p. 105).
- ❑ Bring Bibles, matches, [basic supply kit](#) (p. 2).
- ❑ Bring, if possible, *Seasons Songbook* (Volume 7), *Seasons Music CD* (Volume 7), and *CD player*; downloadable sheet music and MP3 recordings are available at [www.seasonsonline.ca](http://www.seasonsonline.ca).

#### Gather

- ❑ Set a worship space with a white cloth, Christ candle (from Advent wreath), Bible (with bookmark placed in focus passage), bowl, and a jug of water.
- ❑ Bring, if possible, the "Circle Song" (p. 10 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 7; #11 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 7).

#### Engage

- ❑ Bring small pieces of wood, hammer, nails and a length of blue fabric.
- ❑ Bring this week's resource sheet "[Baptized with God's Spirit](#)."
- ❑ **Bible research group:** bring copies of this week's resource sheet "[Baptism in Jesus' Time](#)."
- ❑ **Drama group:** bring biblical costumes, if desired.

#### Respond

Choose one or more of the following activities and bring materials to set up the chosen zones.

- ❑ **Art zone:** soap clay (grate 2-3 bars of white soap, add small amount of water, knead until the consistency of modelling clay, and store in airtight bag), paper with wax film, vegetable oil
- ❑ **Quiet zone:** strips of paper, poster board
- ❑ **Music zone:** song "Invocation" (p. 19 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 7; #5 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 7)
- ❑ **Interview zone:** copies of this week's resource sheet "[Baptism in Our Church](#)"; invite the minister or members of worship committee as guests for a discussion on baptism.
- ❑ **Outreach zone:** dove templates (see [pattern](#) p. 102) cut from cardboard, white paper, construction paper

#### Bless

- ❑ Print "I am God's beloved child" on slips of paper (one for each child).
- ❑ Bring, if possible, the song "May You Find Peace" (p. 26 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 7; #19 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 7).
- ❑ Bring copies of the resource sheet "[Family Letter](#)" (p. 99) for newcomers.



# Coming through the Waters

## Scripture

Mark 1:4–11

**FOCUS** To ponder what it means to be God's beloved children

## Gather

**Welcome** the children as they arrive, introducing guests and newcomers. If you have not met as a group for several weeks invite children to share stories of the Christmas holidays. Explain that this is the first Sunday of a new season, the Season after the Epiphany, when we hear stories about Jesus and the disciples.

### Opening ritual

**Gather** around the worship space. Point out the colour white, marking this as a special Sunday, and explain that the white candle is called the Christ candle, and is the one from the middle of the Advent wreath.

**Sing** or listen to, if possible, the "Circle Song" (p. 10 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 7; #11 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 7).

**Prayer ritual** Come, let us remember God's love poured out over all creation and us. (*Pour water into bowl.*)

Let us remember the light of God's love that Jesus brought to our world. (*Light the candle.*)

God's love shines out for you and me. (*Invite the children to repeat this line after you.*)

Receive the offering and extinguish the candle to signify the end of the gathering worship.

## Connecting with the focus

Invite children to play a game by following your lead in a series of rhythmic actions, such as slapping fingers twice and clapping hands once. Repeat the actions until the group has the beat going well and then pass on the lead by pointing to another player, who introduces a new series of actions set to a different beat. Play until all who want to have had a turn leading the group. Explain that this week's Bible story is about two special leaders, John and Jesus.

## Engage

### Prepare for the Bible story

Invite a child to bring the Bible from the worship area and use the bookmark to open it to the focus passage in the gospel of Mark. Explain that there are very few stories about Jesus' childhood in the Bible and in today's story Jesus is now an adult. Invite children to help create a "workshop" with the carpentry tools in one area and a "river" with the blue fabric in another.

### The Bible story

Use the resource sheet "[Baptized with God's Spirit](#)" to tell the story based on **Mark 1:4–11**. After the story, ask:

- **How would you describe John the baptizer to someone else?**

- **What are some of the things you wonder about when you hear this story?**

Invite children to imagine Jesus as he was walking away from the river after his baptism and thinking about what he had just heard.

- **What are the special words that Jesus would remember?**

### Explore the story further

(*To enable the children to explore the scripture reading further, according to their interests and abilities, explain the two options and have each child select one.*)

**Bible research group** The children in this group will have an opportunity to explore the biblical story further. Distribute Bibles and invite three volunteers to read **Mark 1:4–11** (narrator, John's

voice, and the voice of God) while the rest of the group follows in their Bibles. Distribute copies of the resource sheet "[Baptism in Jesus' Time](#)" and invite children to review the information, beginning with the section about the crowd, then about John, and lastly about Jesus. Discuss the questions in each section together before moving to the next.

**Drama group** The children in this group will have an opportunity to act out the Bible story. Assign the parts of John, Jesus, and other people and provide costumes, if desired. Read **Mark 1:4–11** as the children act it out. Invite the rest of the group to make water sounds when John baptizes people.

**Reporting** Invite the research group to report on their discussion and the drama group to offer a re-enactment of the story.

### The Bible story and us

Jesus' baptism marked a new beginning for Jesus as he got ready to share God's love with everyone. The story of Jesus' baptism is a reminder that we are also loved by God and also called to share in the work that Jesus did.

### ■ What kinds of things can we do to help share God's love with others?

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## Respond

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

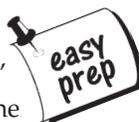
- ❑ **Art zone: Soap doves** God's Spirit came to Jesus in the form of a dove. Invite children to make dove shapes as reminders of this story. Have them rub a few drops of vegetable oil on their hands, place some soap clay on the waxed paper, and mould the clay into dove shapes. Let dry overnight.

**Caution:** Warn children to keep their hands away from their faces until the soap clay has been washed off their hands.

- ❑ **Quiet zone: Group litany** This story reminds us that we are all beloved children of God. Distribute slips of paper and invite children to write one line each, beginning with, "When I..." (get up in the morning, move to a new school, am feeling sad) to contribute to a group litany. Have them glue these strips onto a sheet of poster board and print the refrain, "I know that I'm God's beloved child" under each line. Post in the meeting space.
- ❑ **Music zone: Baptism song** The first two verses of the song "Invocation" offer a prayer for baptism. Invite the

children to listen to the recording of this song (#5 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 7) and sing the first two verses. After singing, talk with the children about baptism as it is practiced in your congregation: who is baptized, who performs the baptism, what does it mean. Then sing the first two verses of the song again.

- ❑ **Interview zone: Baptism** As in Jesus' time, baptism today marks the beginning of something new. Distribute copies of the resource sheet "[Baptism in Our Church](#)" and invite children to use the questions to interview the guest(s), asking their own questions about baptism too. Make arrangements to visit the sanctuary to see the font or area of baptism.
- ❑ **Outreach zone: Baptism cards** In baptism, the church promises to support and encourage the one who is baptized. Distribute paper and dove templates and invite children to cut dove shapes, glue these onto folded construction paper, and write messages inside such as, "Welcome to our church family." Make arrangements with the minister or worship team to distribute cards to the newly baptized.



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## Bless

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**Gather** in the worship space and relight the candle. Invite children to repeat each line after you: "God's love shines out for you and me. God's love shines out for all to see." Distribute slips of paper to take home as reminders that we are all God's beloved children.

**Pray** "O God, you called Jesus beloved.  
Help us to always know that we too are your beloved. Amen."

**Sing**, if possible, the song "May You Find Peace" (p. 26 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 7; #19 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 7).

**Blessing** Send each child out saying, "Go in peace, knowing that you are God's beloved child." Distribute copies of the resource sheet "[Family Letter](#)" (p. 99) for those who did not receive it at the beginning of Advent.

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## Reflect

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Jesus' baptism marked the beginning of his teaching and healing ministry. How will you minister to the children in your group in this new year?



# Baptized with God's Spirit

(based on Mark 1:4–11)

To help the children place this story in Jesus' life, especially for older children, connect this story of Jesus the adult to the story of the visit of the magi.

When Mary, Joseph, and Jesus returned to Nazareth, the village in Galilee where they lived, Joseph took up his work as a carpenter. The child Jesus probably spent many hours playing around the workshop and learned the trade of working with wood from Joseph.

Then the day came when Jesus knew that God had a special job for him. When Jesus told Mary and Joseph, they probably remembered the messages from angels and the words of Simeon in the temple. They knew this day would come.

At the same time, John, the son of Elizabeth and Zechariah, was preaching along the Jordan River. The people called him John the baptizer because he baptized

people in the river. John was not hard to spot in the crowd of people who came to him. His clothing was made of camel's hair and tied with a leather belt around his waist. He lived on locusts and honey. And his words were astonishing.

"Turn from your old ways and be baptized," he called out. "But someone will come who is more powerful than I am. I will not be equal to untie his sandals. I have baptized you with this water. This powerful one will baptize you with God's Holy Spirit."

Jesus left Nazareth and headed to the Jordan River. He came to the place where John was baptizing the people. Jesus followed the people into the river and John baptized Jesus.

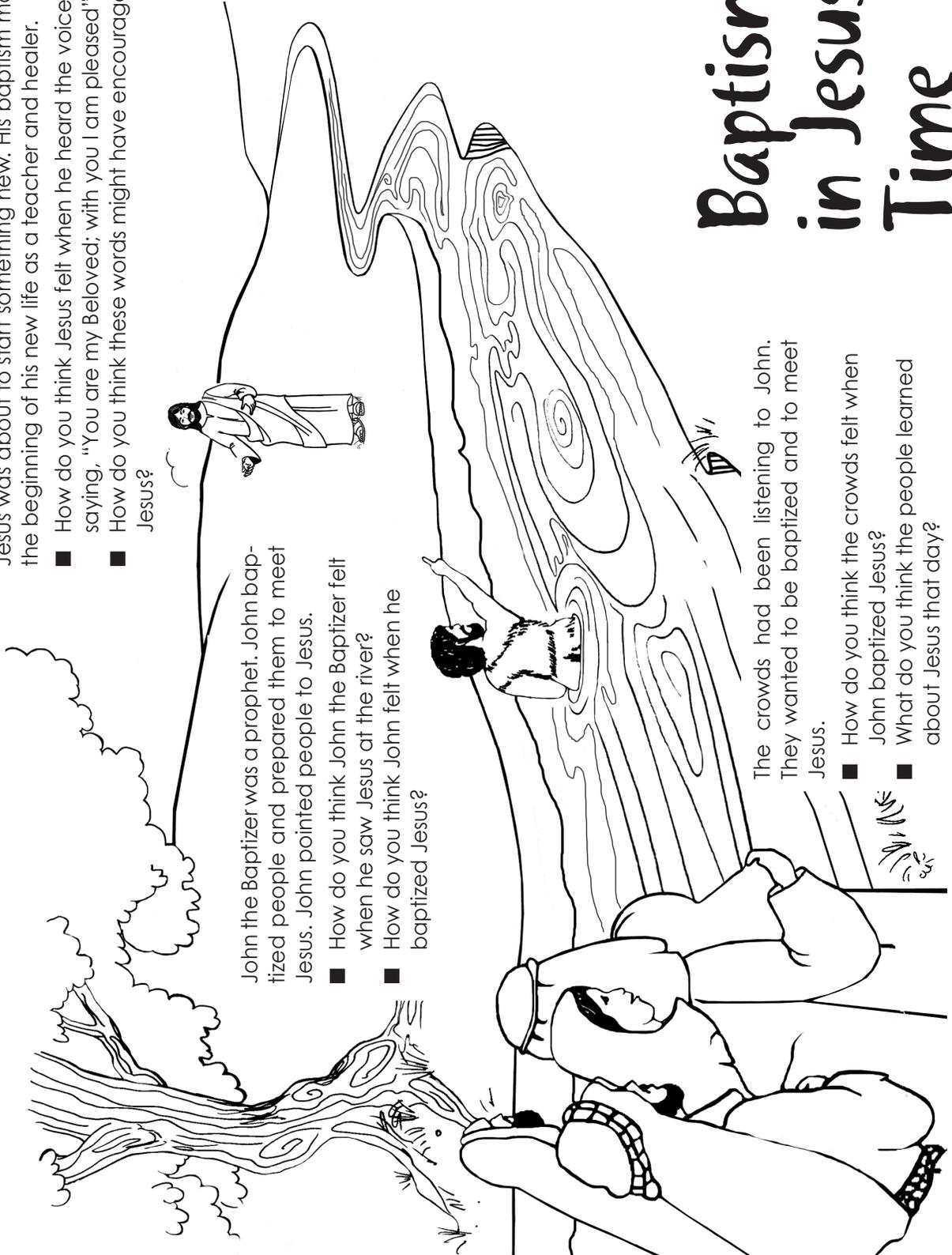
As Jesus was walking out of the water, something happened that didn't happen after other people were baptized. The skies opened. God's Holy Spirit came down to Jesus like a dove. And a voice said, "You are my Beloved. I am very pleased with you."

Now Jesus was ready to do the special job for God.



Jesus was about to start something new. His baptism marked the beginning of his new life as a teacher and healer.

- How do you think Jesus felt when he heard the voice saying, "You are my Beloved; with you I am pleased"?
- How do you think these words might have encouraged Jesus?



John the Baptist was a prophet. John baptized people and prepared them to meet Jesus. John pointed people to Jesus.

- How do you think John the Baptist felt when he saw Jesus at the river?
- How do you think John felt when he baptized Jesus?

The crowds had been listening to John. They wanted to be baptized and to meet Jesus.

- How do you think the crowds felt when John baptized Jesus?
- What do you think the people learned about Jesus that day?

# Baptism in Jesus' Time



# Baptism in Our Church

When Jesus was baptized, a whole new life started for him, and his ministry was the start of a whole new life for many other people.

When we celebrate baptism today, we remember Jesus' baptism. Every church baptizes people a little differently, and some churches focus on certain meanings of baptism. Today, as you listen and observe, try to answer these questions about baptism in your church.

Who is baptized in our church?

Who baptizes people in our church?

Where does baptism happen?

From where does the water for baptism come?

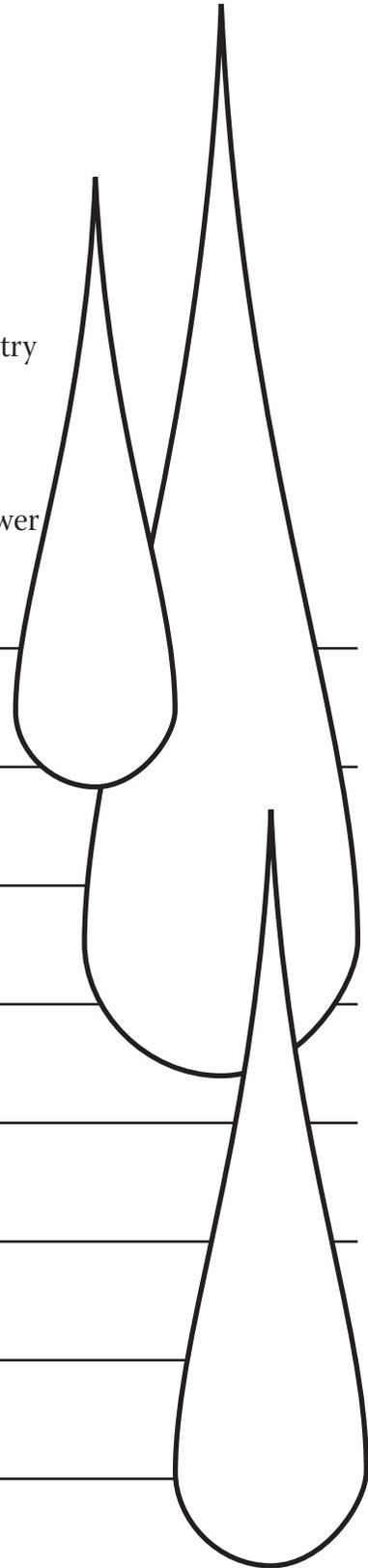
What words are spoken in the baptism?

Is Jesus' baptism mentioned in our baptism service?

What does the congregation do during the baptism?

What does baptism mean to people here?

What is baptism the start of in our church? What new beginning does it signal?



# Family Letter



Dear Families,

Welcome to the seasons of Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany! We are looking forward to exploring these seasons and their scripture readings together with the children. We recognize that this is probably a very busy time for your family, but we hope that you and your children will be able to take some time to experience the religious significance of these seasons. In order to help you, we have provided two resources, "[Advent at Home](#)" and "[The Twelve Days of Christmas](#)." We encourage you to choose some of these activities to share the spirit of Christmas with family and friends.

During Advent the group will be exploring readings from the prophet Isaiah and the Psalms, and the story of Mary's encounter with the angel Gabriel in the first chapter of Luke. These readings will help us reflect on the themes of longing, comfort, and hope.

During the weeks of the Season after the Epiphany (referred to as "ordinary time" in the church year) most of the focus scripture readings come from the gospel of Mark. Children will have an opportunity to explore stories of Jesus' baptism, the call of the fishers, and the beginning of his ministry. The stories of healing and teaching will help children learn more about who Jesus is and discover the ways in which they too are called to share God's light and love in the world.

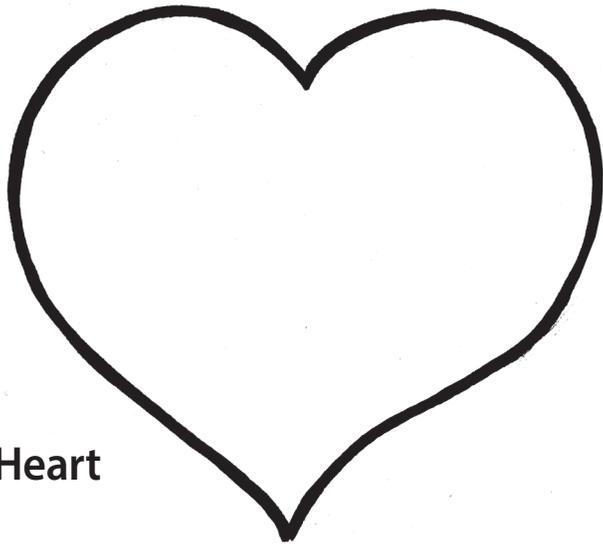
On February 14, the last Sunday of the season, we celebrate the story of Jesus' Transfiguration. Children will have a chance to ponder the mystery and wonder of this story and reflect on their own experiences of God's presence in those "thin places," where the dividing line between the holy and the ordinary is very thin.

During these seasons we will be praying for each child in our group, and we ask that your family also include us in your prayers. You are welcome to visit our meeting area any time. If you have any questions, concerns, or suggestions about the church school program, please feel free to contact us. We are always happy to hear what is working well and what could be changed.

Sincerely,

**Suggested resources:** The *Family Story Bible* and *Family Story Bible Colouring Book*, illustrated by Margaret Kyle, or *The Lectionary Story Bible, Year B*. For older children, *Read, Wonder, Listen: Stories from the Bible for Young Readers*. Both are available from the publisher of *Seasons of the Spirit* at [www.woodlakebooks.com](http://www.woodlakebooks.com).

# Patterns and Poetry

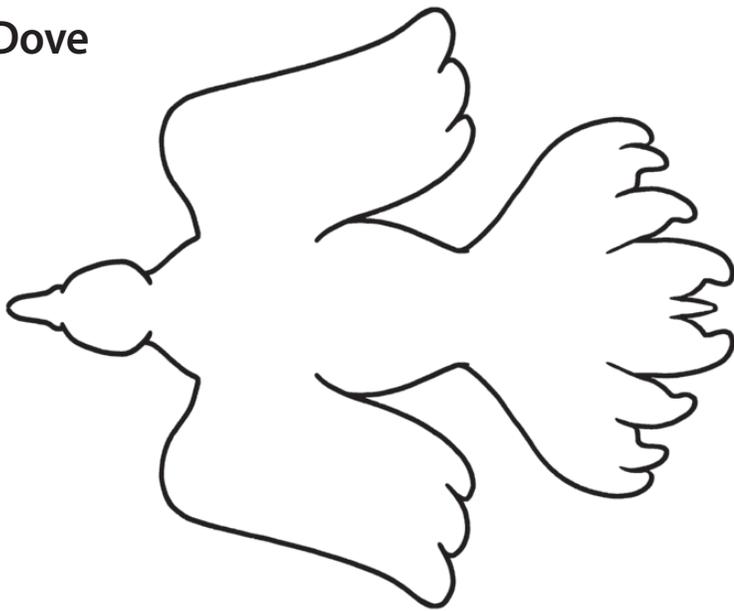


Heart

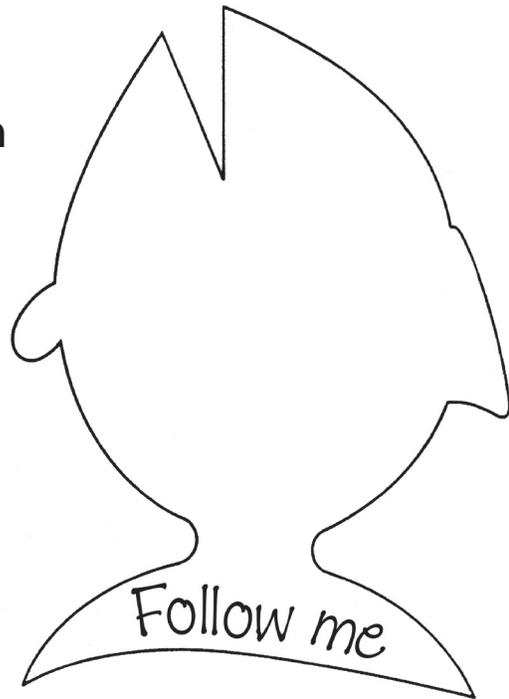


Star

Dove



Fish



## Haiku poems

Haiku poetry is a type of Japanese poetry that has three lines, written in this pattern:

Line 1 – five syllables

Line 2 – seven syllables

Line 3 – five syllables

*Example:*

Love, Peace, Hope, and Joy

Advent candles bring new light

Helping us to wait

# The Gospel according to Mark

By William Loader

**M**ark, the shortest gospel, written probably around 70 CE, set the pattern for the others to follow. After just 13 verses, it gets us into Jesus' ministry straightaway, with no Christmas stories; probably not even knowing them, because Mark's Mary does not really understand who Jesus is (3:20–21). Straight off the plane we hit main street: the baptism scene tells us most of what matters (1:9–11). Heaven is meeting earth, the divine, the human. The Spirit is on Jesus. Jesus is God's son. Foreshadowing the later doctrine of the Trinity, it is as though it holds out a sign saying: "Expect God in what follows!"

The temptations follow (1:12–13), giving us our first major clue why all this is good news and why people called the whole writing a good-news-thing, "a gospel." For there, Jesus confronts Satan. Announcing the reign of God (1:14–15) means announcing liberation from the demonic powers that oppress people. Thus, Jesus' first action after making recruits is to free a man from his demons (1:21–28). Mark, as they came to call the gospel's anonymous writer in the second century, used that world's concepts to describe what we might describe in other terms; but the impact of the good news is very clear in the stories the writer tells. Jesus' actions bring healing, physical and spiritual, restore the marginalized and the self-marginalized to community, and create good news on the ground in actions and words that speak of love and forgiveness, already offered freely to all by John the Baptizer (1:4–5).

Mark's stories show that some people found Jesus' approach annoying, because he gave such priority to human need above other biblical commands, such as Sabbath and purity laws (2:1–3:6). These conflicts reflect tensions both from Jesus' day and from later

times. Mark is closest to Paul in concluding that you cannot impose biblical requirements in all situations, especially as the movement spread outside its originally Jewish culture. Circumcision had to go, as did much else. Mark cleverly employs the feedings of the 5000 and 4000 as symbols of Jesus offering bread to both Jews and Gentiles (6:30–44; 8:1–9, 14–21). The gospel writer's take on one of Jesus' sayings (7:15) suggests that biblical laws about clean and unclean food never did make sense because food just enters the stomach and then the toilet (7:17–23). Matthew and Luke see it differently.

Mark uses stories symbolically. So on either side of the three occasions when Jesus announces that his is the path of serving and facing suffering and the disciples fail to grasp it (8:31–33; 9:31–34; 10:32–45), we find Jesus healing the blind (8:22–26; 10:46–52)! Mark's most confronting statement about greatness in leadership and life is in his account of Jesus' death. Is he the anointed one (the messiah), the king, the Son of God? Yes, he is (8:27; 14:61–62), but his throne is a cross and his crown is made of thorns! The writer of the gospel of Mark was obviously not taken in by Roman propaganda about the emperor as son of God and bearer of "good news." The message is subversive.

Mark appears to have deliberately painted the disciples as failures (8:21; 14:50), perhaps because they were, perhaps as an educational strategy to challenge believers in the writer's own time. Women disciples, whom he largely neglects until at the cross (15:40–41), do much better, but even they fail in the end (16:8). Yet pessimism and cynicism are not Mark's goal. For his story makes it clear that it did not stop at the women's silence (13:9–10). Something must have turned it around. God turned it around, so that the other side of the disciples' failure is faith in the generosity of God, who despite their failures is prepared to get Peter and the disciples, women and men, back on their feet (16:7). That remains good news for us all.

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