JOHN THE BAPTIST

A Voice Crying in the Wilderness

Written by Tracey E. Herzer
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About LearningCycles

What is LearningCycles?
LearningCycles is an innovative approach to faith formation. It takes seriously the spiritual development of children while providing creative and exciting activities that engage children in a whole new level of learning and retention. The rotation-style model means that children work on the same story or concept for several weeks, using different learning approaches in each workshop room they visit.

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Easy to Adapt
You can use the activities in this resource for shorter learning center events, normal classroom use, intergenerational gatherings, and more. Adapt what you find here to best suit your faith formation situation.
LearningCycles make it VERY easy to increase your number of volunteers, by dividing jobs into manageable parts. Here are some ways that parishioners of ALL ages can be involved:

**CYCLE LEADERS** sign up as part of a team of 2 or 3 adults who will teach one 4-6 week cycle. Teachers remain in the same workshop room each week of the cycle and teach the same lesson plan to different classes each week. Workshop rooms may use skills in areas as music, dance, cooking, quilting, gardening or painting, but you don’t have to have a special skill in order to help. Teachers can sign up to help read stories, turn on computers, make popcorn, hand out art supplies, etc.

**SHEPHERDS** commit for the entire school year, but they never have to prepare or teach a lesson! Shepherds work in teams and travel with their class through each of the different workshops. Shepherds are the essential relationship part of this program, learning the children’s names, providing continuity of leadership and being a friendly, safe presence in the classroom each week.

**CYCLE COORDINATORS** are needed for each different cycle. These people manage the details of a cycle, contacting all the volunteer teachers for that cycle, distributing the lesson plans, making sure supplies are purchased, etc.

Some churches have also used:

**DECORATING TEAM** A resourceful group of people is needed to create and plan new and evolving learning spaces. These folks might be interior designers, or they may be people who are just addicted to home improvement shows or have a knack for decorating inexpensively! Churches who share space or don’t have the budget for large-scale renovations will need a group of creative thinkers to come up with props or posters that can be used on Sunday, but safely stored away during the week.

**RESOURCE TEAM** This “big picture” group can be comprised of all your cycle coordinators, as well as interested parents. Together the group handles trouble-shooting, long-range plans and communication to the entire church. For churches that already have a catechist or formation team, that committee can provide the functions of a Resource Team.
General Class Structure

1. OPENING ACTIVITY (10-15 minutes, as children arrive)
Welcome students and make sure everyone has a nametag. Opening activities give early arrivers something to start on immediately and provide a warm, busy room for children to enter. The activity could be simply drawing or decorating your nametag. It could also be coloring sheets or simple games. Check the “Filler Activities” of your lesson plan for ideas or ask your Cycle Coordinator.

2. INTRODUCTIONS (approximately 10 minutes)
   a. Introduce yourself: Tell students about you – your family, how long you have been at this church, what kind of work you do, what your hobbies are, why you signed up to help teach, etc.
   b. Introduce the cycle story or theme: Ask children what they’ve been studying or have done in other rooms on other weeks. Talk about the basic theme or season (see the Overview p. 6 for some ideas). Read the story to children.
   c. Introduce your activity: Tell the children which part of the story your room is focusing on, and perhaps ask them to re-tell you that part of the story in their own words.

3. WORKSHOP ACTIVITY AND REFLECTION (approximately 25-30 minutes)
See attached lesson plans for specific instructions about the main activity. Supplies should be in your classroom, but if you need help, ask your cycle coordinator. If you run low on supplies, please tell your coordinator so they can plan accordingly.

   If children finish early, you can use any of the “Filler Activities” provided in each lesson plan. In addition, you may use activity sheets (see “Suggested Resources for this Cycle”) as “quiet work” for the early finishers while they wait for everyone to complete the task.

   Try to plan your time so that children finish the activity and still have a few minutes to process the class by journaling or drawing. Encourage them to take their work seriously, and try to foster a semi-quiet atmosphere that allows children to think about what they have heard, seen and experienced. Ask questions like “What did you learn today?” or “How did you feel while doing this activity?” Connect your activity back to the story. Studies show us that quiet reflection time is what helps move items from short-term memory into long-term memory so this piece is VERY important!

4. CLEAN UP (approximately 5 minutes)
Have children help clean up and make sure everyone has their papers, jackets, etc. If parents come to the classroom to pick up their children, this is a good time to praise children in front of their parents. This is also a good time to discuss any concerns or questions quietly with parents. Tell the children goodbye. Thank them for coming.
Theological Overview of this Cycle

John the Baptist was the voice crying in the wilderness: “Prepare the Way of the Lord.” His ancient message ringing out across the centuries is just as appropriate today. In today’s busy world, life seems to become even more hectic as we approach the Christmas season, but the church calls us in another direction. In the midst of the chaotic storm of frenzied holiday preparations, the season of Advent is a haven of quiet and contemplation – a place to stop and wait and hope.

Advent is one way we can prepare ourselves for the coming of God’s kingdom again and again. By finding time to wait and watch, we remind ourselves that God’s presence is all around us, breaking into our daily lives all the time in so many different ways. John’s message to “Prepare the Way” reminds us to put aside all the non-essentials and focus on making room for the highway of our God, giving God direct access into our lives and our hearts.

In this unit, we have tried to cover both the basics of John’s life and ministry, as well as a brief introduction to the role of the prophet throughout history. For our purposes, we will be focusing on a prophet as one who tells forth God’s message, not one who foretells the future. In this way, we can all aspire to be prophetic voices – telling God’s good news to all the world around us. We also talk a bit about the intensity of the prophets and how their message isn’t always appreciated by their intended audiences. It would be interesting to talk with your classes about people they may perceive as modern-day prophets and what criteria they use to decide the prophetic voice.

In this unit, we have intentionally tried to stay out of the realm of Christmas, except in some obviously peripheral ways. For example, we use parts of Handel’s Messiah, but we refrain from using any Christmas carols. This is an intentional choice to focus on Advent, rather than Christmas, but the intention of all our cycles is that you use them in ways that work for your church and your program.

In whatever ways you choose to use this unit, may God’s peace rest upon you this Advent season and may you find your own ways to prepare the way of the Lord.

Advent Blessings!
Tracey E. Herzer
Dear Parents –

For many of you, the Christmas machine is probably already beginning to churn. Most people find the weeks leading up to Christmas to be the busiest time of the year and this is especially true for parents. However, this is also the time of year that our church calls us into the quiet mystery of Advent and encourages us to find times for reflection and waiting, even in the midst of the chaos.

The message of John the Baptist was “Prepare the Way of the Lord” and Advent is about preparing room in our busy lives for the coming of the Savior and finding ways to balance the chaos of the season. Several years ago, my spiritual director encouraged me to strive for an Advent season that is “Less Hectic, More Holy” and that little Advent mantra changed everything for me. Leaving some space and silence during Advent gave me more room to be really ready for the joyous celebration of Christmas.

This cycle is about the message of John the Baptist and some of the other prophets of old. It is about getting ready to receive the things God has in store for us. I encourage you to take some time as a family to observe Advent in ways that make sense for you. Here are some suggestions to make life a bit simpler:

- Light an Advent Wreath each night at the dinner table
- Offer an Advent prayer (such as “Lord, help us prepare our minds, hearts and home so we can be ready to welcome you.”) at bedtime or mealtime
- Keep one night each week when the family stays home
- Prepare simple meals
- Find one night to turn off the television, computer, phone, etc.
- Pick one holiday party, tradition or decoration you can live without this year

Use one of these ideas or come up with your own, but I hope you can find at least one thing to make your Advent less hectic and more holy. In the midst of all the excitement of Christmas, may you find your own ways to “prepare ye the way of the Lord”.

Peace be with you,
Tracey E. Herzer

LearningCycles
Once there was a good man named Zechariah, who was a Jewish priest. He and his wife, Elizabeth, obeyed God’s commandments. One day an angel appeared to him and said, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. I am Gabriel and God sent me to give you good news: Your wife will have a son and you will name him John. He will bring many people to God.”

Zechariah said, “How can this be true? I am an old man.” The angel said, “This is truly a message from God and because you did not believe, you will not be able to speak until the baby is born.” When Zechariah came out of the temple, he kept motioning to the people, but was unable to speak.

Everything happened as Gabriel said and when Elizabeth was pregnant, her cousin, Mary, came to visit her. Mary was pregnant with Jesus at the same time that Elizabeth was pregnant with John. When Elizabeth saw Mary, she felt the baby move inside her and she knew that Mary’s baby would be very special.

When John was born, everyone kept trying to convince Zechariah and Elizabeth to name the baby after a relative. But Zechariah asked for a writing tablet and he wrote: “His name is John.” Immediately, Zechariah could speak again and he thanked God.

When John grew up, he tried to tell people about God. Many people thought John was strange because he lived out in the wilderness. He wore camel skins and ate locusts and wild honey. He said, “Prepare the Way of the Lord”, encouraging people to make room in their lives for God.

One day he got mad at some of the people who came to see him. He called them snakes and said that being sons of Abraham wasn’t enough – they needed their own relationship with God. He said they should turn away from their sins and ask God for forgiveness. He told them they should be honest and share what they had, and he baptized many people in the Jordan River.

One day Jesus came to John to be baptized. When Jesus came up from the water, the heavens opened and God’s spirit descended like a dove and settled on Jesus. A voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.”

Story re-told by Tracey Herzer
Suggested Resources for Cycle

VIDEOS or DVDs
Our first-choice movie for this cycle is **John the Baptist** available in VHS videotape or DVD formats through NEST family video. NEST videos are very well done and can be found in a variety of Christian bookstores and resource centers. You can also order from them directly or find out more about their products at [http://www.nestfamily.com](http://www.nestfamily.com) or by calling 1-800-447-5958.

We liked the animated movie (approximately 30 minutes) that covers the entire story of John the Baptist and especially appreciated the free 64-page booklet that comes with the video. The booklet is about the size of a standard coloring book and is filled with coloring sheets, puzzles, word games, etc. all related to the same story as the movie itself. These games make great welcoming activities as children are arriving.

Another useful video resource comes from the Saddleback Kids series. It depicts the baptism of Jesus, which is a part of this cycle’s story. This video can be found at:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_VMNO2MAmwA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_VMNO2MAmwA)
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John the Baptist: Drama Workshop

Bible Reference for the Cycle:

Main Verse for the Cycle:
In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" (Matthew 3:1-3) (New Revised Standard Version)

Key Concepts and Life Application:
- John was a prophet who called people to repentance to prepare for God’s kingdom
- Advent is a time when we prepare our hearts again for the coming of God’s kingdom

Summary of Class Plans:
Children will learn about John the Baptist by using their five senses and will talk about what the life and message of John were like.

Materials Needed:
For Class activities:
- You'll need many objects that children can see, smell, taste, touch or hear. Use your imagination and you can find all kinds of things, but here is the list we used:
  - Map of Judea
  - Jewish "breastplate" (we created them during the Samuel cycle)
  - Clay 10 commandments (we created them during the Moses cycle)
  - Angel pictures & angel wings
  - Cane and grey hair for old man
  - Sign language book
  - Doll wrapped in blanket
  - Baby rattles
  - Small chalkboard & chalk (Write "His name is John" on it)
  - Animal skins (real or fake) – we showed a real skin, but gave each child a piece of fake fur
  - Honey (and spoons or popsicle sticks… and disposable handi-wipes!)
  - Candy that looks like bugs – we found lollipops with "bugs" in them
  - Plastic bugs
  - Picture of the wilderness
  - Plastic snakes
  - Gummy worms
  - "Snakeskin" fabric
  - Dried snake rattle
o Large plastic bowl with some water
o Pictures of the Jordan River
o Large shell used in baptismal font (borrowed from church)
  o Large seashell where you can “hear” the ocean or recording of water
  o Dove toy
  o Recording of “This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased”

- Brown paper lunchbags – one for each child
- Markers or crayons
- Stickers:
  o Smiley face
  o Angel
  o Empty caption bubble (used for captions on photographs)
  o The name JOHN or small letters to spell it out
  o Bees or bugs or camels
  o Snakes
  o Water splashes or waves
  o Dove or cross

For optional filler activities:
- Posterboard or more paper plates
- Markers / crayons

Workshop Lesson Plans:
- **BEFORE CLASS** - Make sure you have read through the script and are familiar with the story. Also make sure you have some miscellaneous things to use as props. Don’t worry about trying to find an illustration for every single thing, but try to gather several different things so that students have many different sensory connections to the story of John the Baptist.

- You can refer to “A General Schedule for Class Structure” (included in the Introductory Materials) for ideas on how to introduce yourself and the story, as well as how to plan your class time appropriately.

- Welcome the children and ask them what they already know about John the Baptist. Even if this is the first introduction, children will probably have a couple of answers for you. If not, tell them you are going to read them the story and then you are going to help them be able to tell the story too.

- Read the cycle story using the version on pages 23-24 of this resource that gives the story and also the props to pass around or put out on a table as you read. We had the children sit in a circle and we passed each prop around so they could hold it.

- After reading the story, we picked up each prop again and asked questions:
  o Map – who can find Judea? Judea is where Zechariah & Elizabeth lived
- **Breastplate** – Remember what this is? This is something special worn by the Jewish priests. Do you remember what the 12 stones represent? (12 tribes)
- **Clay commandments** – who did they follow? (what God gave to Moses)
- **Angel** – how would you feel if an angel appeared to you? What did Gabriel tell Zechariah? How do you think Zechariah felt?
- **Cane** – why did Zechariah doubt he and Elizabeth would have a baby?
- **Sign language book** – how do you suppose Zechariah might have tried to communicate after he couldn’t speak?
- **Doll** – Why do you think Elizabeth’s baby moved inside of her?
- **Chalkboard** – How did Zechariah communicate without speaking? What happened after he named the baby?
- **Skins** – How do you think it would feel to wear skins like this? How do you think it would smell? Would it be hot or cool?
- **Honey** – How does the honey taste?
- **Bugs** – These are just candies shaped like bugs, but some people eat bugs. What would that be like?
- **Wilderness pictures** – What would it be like to live in the wilderness? Do you see houses? Stores? Other people?
- **Snake items** – What sounds do snakes make? How do snakes feel? Why do you suppose John called them snakes? What is a “brood”? (a group of snakes) What is a viper? (a kind of snake)
- **Bowl with water** – what does it mean to be baptized? How do we do baptisms in this church?
- **Picture of Jordan River** – Have you ever seen someone baptized in a river? What do you think it would feel like? Would it be cold or muddy? How would it be different than being baptized in a church?
- **Dove** – what other stories can you think of that include a dove? (Noah’s ark and others) What did the dove in the story symbolize?

- After going through all the props, tell the children they are going to make their own “prop bag” to tell the story of John the Baptist. Children can decorate the outside of their bags while you pass out the items that will go inside.

- You can either use smaller variations of the items used as your props or you can use stickers to symbolize the different parts of the story. (Sticker suggestions are included with the story “script” on page 23-24) We used a combination – here is what we put in each bag:
  - Small piece of an old road map with the word JUDEA written in marker
  - Smiley face sticker
  - Angel sticker
  - Empty caption sticker
  - Baby rattles (party favors from a party store)
  - JOHN stickers
  - Small piece of fake fur (you could also use burlap)
  - Plastic bug
- Bit-O-Honey piece of candy
- Camel sticker
- Gummy worms (for snakes)
- Small shell
- Water splashes sticker
- Dove sticker
- Small wooden cross

- Once all the bags are complete, have everyone find a partner to practice telling the story to, using the prop bag. Then switch roles and let the other person try.

- Ask everyone to help clean up the room and put away all the costumes, props, etc. When the room is clean, gather the group together and praise the work they did.

- After the discussions, give students a few minutes to write in their journals or quietly think about what they have learned today. (Remember that this quiet reflection time is what helps move these experiences into long-term memory!) Have students focus on the characters. When in my life have I acted like John the Baptist? Like Zechariah? Like Elizabeth? Like someone listening to John’s message?

**Filler Activities:**
- Follow the Leader – Remind the children that part of John’s message was to “make the crooked straight”. Have an adult start out as the leader. Walk across the room in a very crooked path, zig-zagging around furniture, etc. Then walk a straight line. Ask children which one was easier to follow? Which one was faster? Then let students take turns being the leader.
A VOICE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS

Once in Judea, there was a good man named Zechariah, who was a Jewish priest. He and his wife, Elizabeth, obeyed God's commandments.

One day an angel appeared to him and said, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. I am Gabriel and God sent me to give you good news: Your wife will have a son and you will name him John. He will bring many people to God.”

Zechariah said, “How can this be true? I am an old man.” The angel said, “This is truly a message from God and because you did not believe, you will not be able to speak until the baby is born.” When Zechariah came out of the temple, he kept motioning to the people, but was unable to speak.

Everything happened as Gabriel said and when Elizabeth was pregnant, her cousin, Mary, came to visit her. Mary was pregnant with Jesus at the same time that Elizabeth was pregnant with John. When Elizabeth saw Mary, she felt the baby move inside her and she knew that Mary’s baby would be very special.

When John was born, everyone kept trying to convince Zechariah and Elizabeth to name the baby after a relative. But Zechariah asked for a writing tablet and he wrote: “His name is John.” Immediately, Zechariah could speak again and he thanked God.
When John grew up, he tried to tell people about God. Many people thought John was strange because he lived out in the wilderness. He wore camel skins and ate locusts and wild honey. He said, “Prepare Ye the Way of the Lord”, encouraging people to make room in their lives for God.

One day he got mad at some of the people who came to see him. He called them snakes and said that being sons of Abraham wasn’t enough – they needed their own relationship with God.

He said they should turn away from their sins and ask God for forgiveness. He told them they should be honest and share what they had and he baptized many people in the Jordan River.

One day Jesus came to John to be baptized. When Jesus came up from the water, the heavens opened and God’s spirit descended like a dove and settled on Jesus. A voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.”
John the Baptist: Story Workshop

Bible Reference for the Cycle:

Main Verse for the Cycle:
In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’” (Matthew 3:1-3) (New Revised Standard Version)

Key Concepts and Life Application:
- John was a prophet who called people to repentance to prepare for God’s kingdom
- Advent is a time when we prepare our hearts again for the coming of God’s kingdom
- John’s message was “Prepare Ye the Way of the Lord"

Summary of Class Plans:
In this workshop, the children will talk about John the Baptist, specifically the message that he proclaimed, and what we can learn from John’s message

Materials Needed:
For Class plans:
- Copies of the blank puzzle (see page 30)
- Crayons
- Scissors
- Ziplock baggies
- Permanent markers (for teachers to write students name on baggies)
- Books for younger classes (see list on next page)

For optional filler activities:
- Blank paper for drawing
- Crayons

Workshop Lesson Plans:
- You can refer to “A General Schedule for Class Structure” (included in the Introductory Materials) for ideas on how to introduce yourself and the story, as well as how to plan your class time appropriately.
- Welcome children as they arrive. When it is time to begin, gather the class together. Invite them to lie down or close their eyes – do whatever they need to really be able to pay attention to the story. Then read the cycle story about John the Baptist called “A Voice Crying in the Wilderness” from page 8 of this cycle.
FOR YOUNGER STUDENTS: With pre-readers and early readers (K-1st), you will need to read the short cycle story given at the beginning of this unit and then do a quick recap of the story. Ask them if there were any words they didn’t understand and see if they can help you “fill in the blanks” of the story, such as: “Zechariah and Elizabeth were good people and one day someone came to give them a message. Who was it?” (The Angel, or Gabriel)

FOR YOUNGER STUDENTS: Often your classes of young students are happy to hear several stories in a row, especially if they can be on the floor on pillows or blankets. Here are some suggestions for books that will work with this cycle:
- Send a Baby (The Birth of John the Baptist) by Mary Manz Simon
- Jesus and John the Baptist (People of the Bible) by Catherine Storr
- Camel’s Hair and Honey – part of the paperback series of Arch Books
- Elizabeth’s Christmas Story – part of the paperback series of Arch Books

FOR OLDER STUDENTS: Your 2nd-5th Graders will need more activity than just listening to a story. Ask them to listen carefully to the story (use the shortened one from page 8) and then you will be doing another activity.

FOR OLDER STUDENTS: After you have read the cycle story, ask for their thoughts about the story, using questions like this – or questions that you come up with:
- What was John’s message?
- What do you think “A voice crying in the wilderness” means?
- In what ways was John that voice?
- What can we learn from this story?
- What was your favorite part of the story?
- Who else had a message that sounded like John’s?
- How can we prepare a way for the Lord?
- What does “repent” mean? (To turn around or turn away)

PUZZLE DRAWING FOR BOTH GROUPS: After they have heard the story and talked about it a little bit, hand out copies of the puzzle page. Have them draw a picture of John the Baptist or of other people “preparing the way of the Lord”. After they have drawn their picture, have them cut it apart. (Younger students will need help with this part) Then see if they can put it back together. Once they have done that, have them put their puzzle pieces into their baggie and find a partner to swap puzzles with. Have each child try to put together the other person’s puzzle.

REPENT game – Remind children that “repent” means to turn away from something. This is not just saying you are sorry, but making different choices. This variation of “Simon Says” should be a crowd pleaser for all ages. Tell the group that you will be giving them different movement instructions such as “march in place” or “take three baby steps forward” or “Pat your head”. But when you say “REPENT”, they have to turn around and face the other way. See how quickly everyone can follow. For older groups, you can make it more difficult by saying, “Everyone with blonde hair,
REPENT” or “Everyone with a T in their name, REPENT”. After you have done this for a while, allow members of the class to take turns being the person giving the directions.

- After playing the game, remind everyone that even though we were having fun and playing a silly game – being called to repent is actually quite a serious message, both for the people who heard John the Baptist and for all of us today. God wants us to live lives that are pleasing to God and when we realize we have done something that is wrong, we always have the chance to repent – to turn around and do something differently the next time; to make better choices.

- CHARADES – Have group members take turns acting out some part of the story of John the Baptist while the rest of the class tries to guess which character it is or what is happening in the charade. The first one to guess correctly gets to be the next charade leader.

- Before class is over, make sure to leave about 10 minutes for students to quietly write or draw in their journals about what they heard today. Ask students to focus their journaling on one particular part of the story that touched or interested them.

**Filler Activities:**

- “JOHN, MAY I?” GAME – You can also do a REPENT variation of the “Mother, May I” game where instead of calling out directions, each player takes a turn asking if they can move – such as “John, may I take three baby steps forward?” And John can say “Yes”, “No” or “Repent!”

- CLAY MESSAGE – Give each child a lump of clay and have them illustrate different parts of John’s message. Even young students can illustrate the “every valley shall be exalted and every hill made low” just by flattening out their clay!

- For younger students, you can always fill up any extra time by reading another story. Maybe one focusing on Advent or on preparing for something.
John said, “Prepare Ye the Way of the Lord”