

# 18 THE ROAD IN THE WILDERNESS

It started out as a small storm off the west coast of Africa. Meteorologists called it a tropical storm. Over the course of the next few days they watched it move westward out into the wilderness of the Atlantic Ocean.

Then one day the meteorologists noticed that the winds within the storm had increased. Its barometric pressure had changed drastically. The storm was upgraded to a tropical depression. The previous storm had been called "Evelyn"; the name "Fernando" was the next on the list.

Fernando continued to build, moving westward, forming a definite swirl pattern of clouds on the satellite photos and on radar screens. The meteorologists went out in an airplane to watch Fernando grow and to monitor its strength and movements.

As Georgia Mantez was watching Fernando on a radar screen, it seemed to disappear. It was just a blip on a radar screen. It was there one day—big as life—but gone the next. Then suddenly, two days later, there it was again. It was bigger than before and was moving toward the Caribbean islands. Within a matter of hours this tropical depression had grown into a full-blown hurricane, Hurricane Fernando.

When Fernando hit the small islands of the Caribbean, nothing was spared. Boats, homes, factories, and even bridges collapsed before Fernando's fury and ocean swells. After Fernando, life was never the same again.

## 3 STATEMENTS

- John the Baptist announced the coming of a new age that would break in upon the world.
- This "salvation" was Jesus in whom forgiveness and God's mercy became a reality for all people.
- In the wilderness, Jesus felt the terrors of temptation.

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*Source*

## THE VOICE IN THE WILDERNESS

Like a blip on a radar screen, he was there one minute—big as life—but gone the next. Then suddenly, there he was again, bigger than before and coming this way like a tropical storm transformed overnight into a raging hurricane. This hurricane's name was John the son of Zechariah. He is known by what he did. We call him John the Baptist.

Who was the man? Where did he come from? What was he doing out there in the wilderness beyond the Jordan River? Read Luke 3:1-3 to discover who John was and what John was about.

To many who went out to hear him, John was just another religious person preaching about the coming judgment of God. But John was not just another prophet of doom and gloom. John was a messenger sent to announce the coming of the King. John

was not only preparing the way of the King; *John the Baptist announced the coming of a new age that would break in upon the world.*

Even before John was born, God had a purpose for him. In Luke 1:14-17, the angel Gabriel's words to John's father, Zechariah, summarized John's mission. Read those verses, especially verse 17. According to Gabriel, what were John's three purposes?

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- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

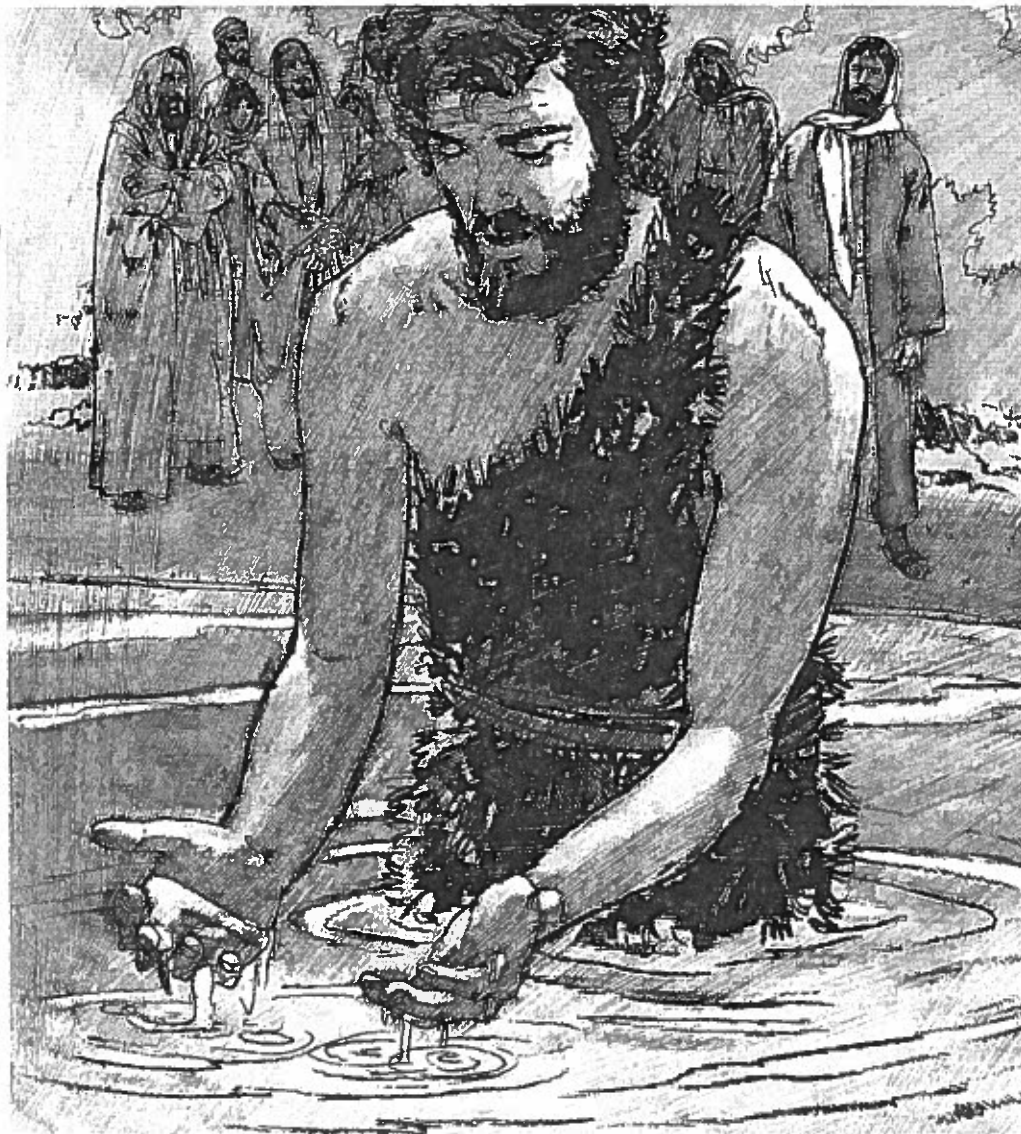
John carried out his work in the area east of the Jordan River, an area rich in meaning for the Israelites. He called the people to a new healing that

he called a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

The word *baptism* means a "washing" or "cleaning." Baptism is nothing new to Christianity. Baptism had been a part of the faith of Israel for centuries. It was a ritual sign of repentance and of washing away old sins. Those who came out to John thought they knew what John was preaching—another ritual washing for the forgiveness of sins.

But John preached about baptism as a means of repenting of sins in order to receive forgiveness. The emphasis for John was not on the water, but on repentance. John's baptism was different. It placed emphasis on a person's heart and not on the washing ritual. Check the phrase you think best defines the word *repentance*.

*John the Baptist announced the coming of a new age that would break in upon the world.*



***This "salvation" was Jesus in whom forgiveness and God's mercy became a reality for all people.***

- \_\_\_\_\_ Saying you are sorry
- \_\_\_\_\_ A change of heart and mind
- \_\_\_\_\_ An about-face
- \_\_\_\_\_ A willingness to change

When people repent, they are first aware of a broken relationship between themselves and God. Next, they recognize that this relationship was broken by their own turning from God. Finally, they desire to be made right with God and seek to live as God would have them live.

John's purpose was not to make the people feel miserable. John's preaching had a saving purpose. John announced that he had come to bring the news of the coming of the Messiah. The gospel writer Luke saw John as fulfilling the prophecy from Isaiah 40:3-5. Read Luke 3:4-6. What things will happen when the Lord comes?

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### THE MIGHTY ONE COMES

According to the gospel writer Luke, John prepared the way so that God could announce salvation for all people. *This "salvation" was Jesus in whom forgiveness and God's mercy became a reality for all people.*

Luke wrote that the people were waiting for the one God had promised to send to save them—the Messiah. They thought John might be the Messiah, but he quickly told them otherwise. Read Luke 3:16-17.

John described the coming Messiah in this way. Is it good news to you or bad news? Why?

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Finally, the one for whom the people had been waiting arrived on the scene. Read Luke 3:21-22.

Wait! Where were the trumpets? Where were the armies? Where were the

clouds of fire and smoke that would assure people that this one was the Messiah?

Luke's account of Jesus' baptism did not make it seem like a big thing. Jesus was just mentioned along with all of the other people who had been baptized. But maybe that is how God wanted it all along. God identified closely with all the people by becoming human in Jesus Christ.

But there was something more going on here. Read Luke 3:21-22. You read something like that before in Luke's gospel. Read Luke 1:26-35 and 2:8-11. What happened the first two times there was a word from God?

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Mary and Joseph knew who Jesus was from the words of Gabriel. The shepherds knew from the words of the angels the night of Jesus' birth. Those who came out to hear John the Baptist heard something about Jesus, too. They heard what God had to say about this seemingly normal man from Nazareth.

The word was out, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." The world was never the same again. The Messiah of God brought the new era of God's rule of grace. Since the foundations of the world, God had made a decision to be a merciful and loving God. God decided to make all that happen in Jesus Christ.



## TRIALS IN THE WILDERNESS

Jesus the Christ, the Messiah, had a lowly birth. He was raised in a working-class family in a small town. Jesus knew what it was to work, to cry, and to feel the pain of life and death. Jesus was God in the flesh for the sake of all people. And now, after his baptism, Jesus experienced the terrors each of us feels. *In the wilderness, Jesus felt the terrors of temptation.* Read the story of Jesus' temptation in Luke 4:1-13.

The first temptation, to turn stones to bread, may not seem to be of great importance at first. Jesus was hungry after 40 days of fasting. What could be wrong in using just a little of his power to turn stones to bread? Who would know anyway? But look how Satan began the temptation: "If you are the Son of God. . . ." There was another temptation behind Satan's temptation to turn stones into bread. Satan wanted to test whether God was reliable. But Jesus refused to play Satan's games.

Jesus did not expect God to prove that God was reliable. In rejecting the temptation of Satan, Jesus refused to use his own power for selfish reasons. Jesus had come to serve God's people, not to have an easy life.

Next, Satan showed Jesus all the glory of the world. Satan said it could all belong to Jesus. All Jesus had to do was bow down and worship Satan just once. But Jesus refused to play Satan's games.

Jesus knew that bargains with evil can never be trusted. The only one worthy of worship is God. Only God rules all the world. Other rulers are only temporary.

Satan tried a third time to tempt Jesus. This time Satan used the Bible to convince Jesus to give in. Satan is good at that type of temptation. No one anywhere knows God's Word better or knows more *about* God than does Satan. The only difference is that Satan does not trust God's promises. Satan tried to use God's promise to catch Jesus. But for a third time Jesus refused.

In Jesus we see one who clearly recognized the power of sin and the terrible damage sin causes. Sin destroys the relationship between God and God's people. Sin destroys relationships in the human family. In Jesus we see one who knew how easily people can be tempted. We also see one whose trust was in God alone.



## THE TIME OF TRIAL

Jesus taught the disciples to pray knowing that God would be with them when temptations came. Jesus taught them to pray, "And do not bring us to the time of trial" (Luke 11:4). That petition is both a request and a statement of faith.

Here is what Martin Luther said about the Sixth Petition of the Lord's Prayer in the Small Catechism.

"God tempts no one to sin, but we ask in this prayer that God would watch over us and keep us so that the devil, the world, and our sinful self may not deceive us and draw us into false belief, despair, and other great and shameful sins.

And we pray that even though we are so tempted we may still win the final victory."

Circle the words that describe what God does for us. Underline the words that describe what happens to us in temptation.

*In the wilderness, Jesus felt the terrors of temptation.*

# Shaping life

## WHAT SHALL WE DO NOW?

Read Luke 3:7-10. John announced the coming of the Messiah of God. He spoke strongly of the need for repentance for the forgiveness of sins. To this the people responded with an anxious question: "What then shall we do?"

1. What do you think people should have done once they heard John's message of the coming Messiah?

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2. Read Luke 3:11-14. What are the following groups to do?

common people: \_\_\_\_\_

tax-collectors: \_\_\_\_\_

soldiers: \_\_\_\_\_

Discuss together one or two of the following questions.

- What is surprising about John's directions for living in the new era of God's rule?
- What kind of responses did you expect to hear?
- Why do you think people should live the way John describes?

In the face of such an overwhelming endtime and prophetic message, John's directions appear to have no punch. He lists no unusual activities. There are no religious rituals one must perform. John calls for us to be unselfish.

But is *that* so easy?

## BAPTIZED!

After Jesus was baptized, Luke tells us that the heavens opened. Like a dove, the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus and a voice from heaven said, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (Luke 3:22). Has anything like that ever happened to you?

Most people would say it has not. Very few Christians would admit that they have heard with their ears a voice from heaven speak to them. People think that sort of thing happened only in Bible times. But is God's direct word limited to those times almost 2000 years ago? Did God only speak then, leaving you to listen to another person's remembering? What do you think?

Look at the liturgy for Holy Baptism in *Lutheran Book of Worship* (pages 121-125), or at the baptism liturgy your congregation uses. Read through that liturgy to discover where God said the same thing to you as was said to Jesus at his baptism.



## FURTHER

# opportunities

### Mishna Minutes

One powerful word from Scripture is recorded in Psalm 23. Memorize this passage. Look in your church library or ask your teacher or pastor for a Bible commentary on Psalm 23. Read the commentary and reflect on what this passage meant for the people who first heard it. Make a poster of what Psalm 23 means to you. Display it for your class and explain it to them.

### Activity 1

Identify three temptations that you think people your age experience often. Think through each one and

1. In whose name were you baptized?

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2. After the baptism in the LBW service, the pastor says to the one baptized, "\_\_\_\_\_(name)\_\_\_\_\_, child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked by the cross of Christ forever." How is this announcement the same as the one Jesus and the people heard in Luke 3:22?

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write down the damage that can result from giving in to these temptations. Then write a prayer of forgiveness young people could use.

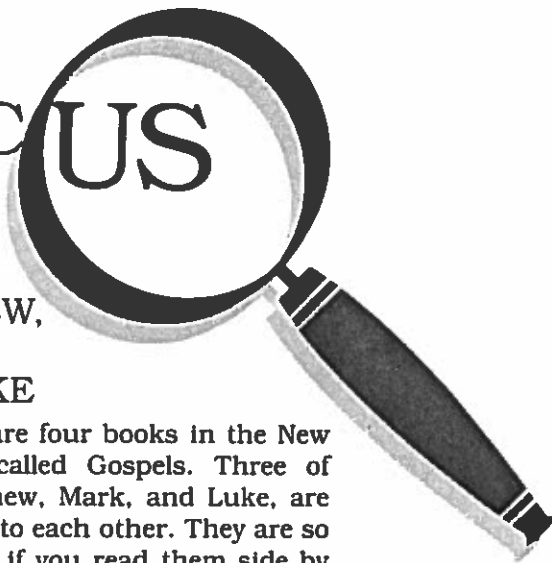
#### Activity 2

Find out about Alcoholics Anonymous or Ala-Teen. These two organizations help people overcome drug and alcohol addictions. Make some notes about these groups and tell one other person about how these organizations help people deal with chemical abuse.

#### Activity 3

Write a prayer in which you ask God to help you overcome a particular temptation that is bothering you. You also may want to talk to your pastor or a close friend about it.

# FOCUS



## ON MATTHEW, MARK, AND LUKE

There are four books in the New Testament called Gospels. Three of them, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, are very similar to each other. They are so similar that if you read them side by side, it looks like the writers just copied the same story. In fact, that is what scholars think they did! The differences among them happened when an individual writer changed the order, added a story, or changed a few words to emphasize something or to make a different point. The story of Jesus' baptism by John (Matthew 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; and Luke 3:21-22) is a good example of how each writer has changed the story just a little to fit his needs.

Because these three gospels are so similar they are called "synoptic gospels." The word *synoptic* (sin-OP-tik) comes from the Greek word *synoptikos* which means "seeing the whole together."

In the way that these three gospels agree or disagree with one another, scholars have determined that Mark was written first and that Matthew and Luke each had a copy of Mark when they wrote their gospels.

There are also sections of Matthew and Luke that agree with one another but are not contained in Mark. This has led scholars to think that there must have been another written source known by Matthew and Luke. This source, a copy of which no one has found, is called "Q" for the German *Quelle* which means "a source."

In addition to having a copy of Mark and "Q," Matthew and Luke each had his own special source of material. These special sources included stories, parables, and sayings of Jesus that only Matthew or Luke knew.