

Unit 4
God Works in the Old Testament

The Days of the Messiah

13. John the Baptist: Forerunner of the Messiah

Under foreign rule for hundreds of years, the Jews dream of a Messiah, who would restore the kingdom of Israel. People first think that John was the Messiah, but he denied it. He was only the one who was sent to prepare the way for God's Anointed.

14. Jesus: Son of David, Son of Abraham

Jesus, the promised Messiah, is born in the days of King Herod. He proclaims a new kingdom not of this world, which will include everyone who follows the Lord's way and keeps His commandments.

15. Apostles: Witnesses to Christ

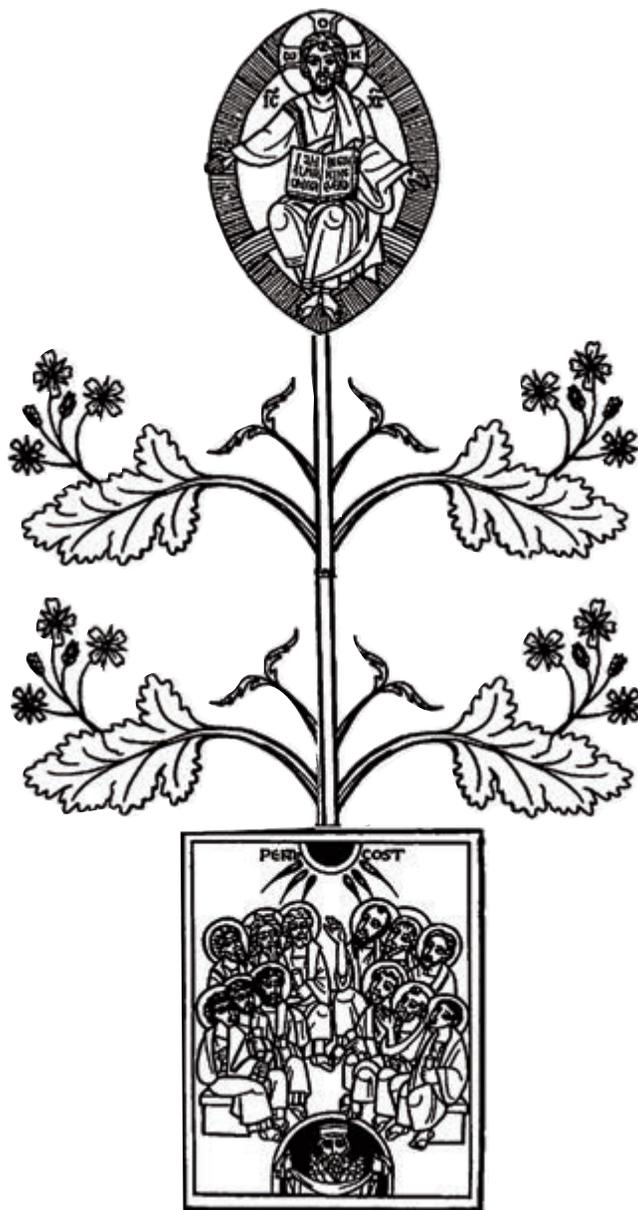
The Apostles, given courage by the Holy Spirit, began witnessing to Christ's resurrection. Joined by the Lord's brothers, they go to Jewish settlements throughout the Roman and Persian Empires. The risen Christ appears to Paul and with his companions Barnabas, Timothy and Titus, they spread the Gospel among the Gentiles.

16. The Apostolic Church

The life of the Church in Jerusalem reflects four main characteristics still the heart of our church life today: they worshiped at the Breaking of the Bread and the daily hours of prayer, they studied the Apostles' teachings, they shared what they had and they gathered in one another's homes for common meals.

c. 5 BC - AD 3	c. 5 AD - AD 33	c. AD 33 - 90
Days of the Messiah	Days of the Messiah	Days of the Messiah
John the Baptist	Prophets	The Apostles and Their Church

Unit Activity - The Kingdom Tree



The concept of the Kingdom Tree is taken from the Lord's parable of the mustard seed (Matthew 13:31-32 and Mark 4:30-32). The Church grows and spreads like this tree and people from all nations find a home in it.

While the focus on the Jesse Tree project was to make ornaments to hang on a tree, the concept behind this project is creating a tree poster. Lesson 15 includes the roots (the Apostles) and the crown (Christ in glory) as well as the first branch. The students will be asked to attach to the tree poster another branch representing the time period covered in each lesson.

The catechist may copy the branches and leaves in different sizes trimmed to suggest a growing tree. Students should write on the leaves of this branch all the events and personages mentioned in the lesson. The Kingdom Tree then can become another tool reinforcing the message of the day's lesson and for reviewing the previous lesson as well.

Lesson 13 - John the Baptist: Forerunner of the Messiah

Objectives

By the end of this lesson the student should know that:

- Explain the Messiah as the anointed one the Jews wanted to restore their kingdom.
- Recognize some of the qualities Jews looked for in the Messiah.
- Recount the main events in the life and ministry of John the Baptist.
- See a connection between the ascetical life and the figures of John and Elijah.
- Know that the Church sees John as the greatest of the saints, after the Theotokos.

For the Catechist

In our Church's troparion to St John the Baptist, we say: "*The remembrance of the just is worthy of praise, but the Lord's testimony is sufficient for you, O Forerunner.*" Many righteous men and women throughout the ages have been praised by the Church, but there is only one saint to whom Christ Himself bore witness: "*I tell you, among those born of women no one is greater than John*" (Luke 7:28). This is why the Eastern Churches commemorate as the greatest saint - after the Theotokos - the prophet, forerunner and Baptist, John, the link between the Old and New Testaments.

Dependent upon one foreign power after another since the eighth century BC, Jews in the time of Christ were particularly restless and many sought political liberation from Rome. Prayerful Jews looked to God to intervene as He had in the past to save His People from oppression by sending them a Messiah. John, however, proclaimed Jesus to be "*the One who is coming after me... [who] will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire*" (Matthew 3:11). As Messiah, Jesus would not espouse a political or revolutionary platform. Rather He would affirm, "*My kingdom does not belong to this world. If my kingdom did belong to this world, my attendants would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not here*" (John 18:36).

Jesus' teaching and John's way of life point to an idea of God's Kingdom that is at variance with human expectations of what is good or even godly. In our Tradition this "counter-cultural" aspect of the Kingdom of God is expressed in monasticism, in the manner of Elijah and John. These lessons on the messianic Kingdom are an appropriate time to introduce the students to the monastic witness, through direct contact, where possible, or through video and internet programs.

Materials Needed:

Opening Prayer: Icon corner, student texts

Introduction: Easel or wall pad, markers,

Guided Reading: Abingdon's Bible Maps for Children

Activity A: "John the Baptist" Worksheet, pencils

Activity C: Time Travel Through the Bible video and leader's guide

Activity D: "Jesse Tree" Worksheet, craft items

Icons and Pictures:

St John the Baptist; Theophany (*Come Bless the Lord*, #35, 29)

Herod's Festival (*Revelation in Color*, #9)

1. Opening Prayer

Pray the selection from Psalm 137 from the section Our Worship *Recalls the Old Testament* on page 62 in the student text. Remind the students that this Psalm is the sad song of a Jew exiled to Babylon, as we learned in previous lessons. It represents the hundreds of years before Christ that Jews were under one foreign rule or another.

2. Review

Review the main points of the previous lesson using the pages from your wall or easel pad.

Alternate: let each student briefly "teach" one page in the text, pages 59-62.

3. Introduction

Ask whether any of the students has ever been to or heard of a "Six Flags" theme park. After a brief moment to recount their experiences, ask:

- What are the "Six Flags" in the park's name? (*The flags of the six countries that have ruled part of Texas, site of the first "Six Flags" park*)
- Can you identify these six countries? (*France, Spain, Mexico, the Texas Republic, the Confederacy and the United States*)
- What other countries have governed part of the United States in the last 400 years? (*England, the Netherlands, Russia, the independent Kingdom of Hawaii, the independent Republic of California*)

Note that, besides these modern nations that have flags, there were countless Native American (Indian) nations without flags that ruled parts of what is our country today.

In the last lessons we mentioned some of the "Six Flags" that ruled over the Israelites after the days of the kings. Ask:

- What were some of these countries? (*Assyria, Babylon, Egypt, Persia*)

Note that today we'll add two more occupying powers to complete our "Six Flags," the Greeks and the Romans.

Background Reading (The Messiah: Jewish Expectations and Interpretations):

"With the return of the Exiles from Babylon and the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem (516 BC), a degree of autonomy and stability returned to Israel. The monarchy was revived only briefly (and the 'Kings' were not descendants of David) and Israelite territory passed from the Persians to the Greeks under Alexander the Great (330 BC) and from the Greeks to the Romans (70 BC). Except for a period of forcible Greek interference in Jewish life including the desecration of the Temple (167 BC), foreign powers generally left Israel free in matters of worship and culture, and Roman Emperors until Hadrian (reigned AD 117-138) even made special concessions to Jewish customs. Jews lived in all the great cities of the ancient world; more lived outside the Holy Land than in it and, even in Jerusalem itself Jews were sharply divided over how much foreign (Greek) culture they could assimilate without losing their identity"(OTB 107).

4. Guided Reading, Pages 65-66

13 John the Baptist: Forerunner of the Messiah



The Persians conquered the Babylonian Empire in 539 BC and within a year allowed the Jews to return to their homeland. Those who returned began to rebuild their homes, their temple and God's life in the Promised Land. The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah describe their experience in this period under Persian rule.

Other Jews did not return, but remained in Babylon or settled in other cities of the Persian Empire. When the Persians conquered Egypt in 525 BC, the Jewish colony grew there as well. These colonies of Jews outside the Holy Land came to be called the *Diaspora* or *Dispersion*. In the New Testament, the Epistle of James was addressed to "the twelve tribes in the diaspora" (James 1:1). Some Jews who lived outside the Holy Land.

The Holy Land remained under Persian rule until the Persians were defeated by Alexander the Great in 331 BC. Alexander was king of Macedonia in Greece and his victory began over two hundred years of Greek rule in the Middle East. The Holy Land was ruled by Alexander's successors until 63 BC when it was conquered by the Romans, who ruled it until the seventh century AD.

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Write the objectives of the lesson on a wall pad or easel pad so that the page can be preserved and used for review next week.

Have the students **look up the underlined words** (*vassal*, *ascetic*) in the Glossary at the end of the book.

Have the students **read the four paragraphs on pages 65-66**. Ask whether any of them have lived anywhere that was occupied by foreign troops. If not, discuss any films or TV news they have seen showing foreign occupation. Ask for their impressions on what it might have been like. While six flags may look pretty lined up together, they may not represent pleasant times.

Refer to the map of the Roman Empire on page 174 and have the students locate Macedonia, Rome, Assyria and Mesopotamia (Babylon). Ask:

- Where is the Holy Land in relation to these centers of power? (*In the middle*)
- What could happen to those in the middle of warring powers? (*They get crushed.*)

Note that modern wars are followed by longer occupations (e.g. World War II, the Iraq War). Today, as a rule, occupation is temporary. Have the students calculate from the information on page 65 how long the Jews lived under foreign rule before Christ: under the Persians (208 years: 539-331 BC), the Greeks (270 years: 331-61 BC), and the Romans (61 BC - AD 633). (*In all, c. 539 years.*)

Background Reading (The Messiah: Jewish Expectations and Interpretations):

"By the first century AD, the urge for political independence, nostalgia for Israel's glorious past, reform movements seeking a return to religious purity, and the troubling unfulfilled promise that the line of King David would rule Israel forever (made by the prophet Nathan to David, 2 Kings/Samuel 7:14-15), all contributed to a complex assortment of hopes and ambitions. The general sentiment in Israel held that a radical change was either imminent from heaven or long overdue from men themselves. While certain pious societies retreated into the desert to prepare for the 'day of the Lord,' guerrilla bands took to the hills of Galilee where they struck at the Romans again and again" (*OTB 107*).

During the time of Persian and Greek rule, the most important Jewish leader was the High Priest of the temple in Jerusalem. There were many governors and local rulers in the Holy Land under Persian, Greek and Roman rule, but there was no king until the Romans appointed the governor of Galilee, Herod, to be the young king of Judea in 37 BC. It is this Herod who was king at the time that John the Baptist and Jesus were born.

Looking for a Messiah

After the breaking of Solomon's kingdom and especially since the Jews' exile to Babylon, many Jews began to look for God to send them a Messiah. The word means Anointed and refers to how kings were anointed with oil as a sign of their office. The Messiah, then, would be a king who would restore the Jewish nation.

The Messiah's kingdom would not be like the other Jewish nations, based by military or greed. It would be a time of peace and justice. The prophet Isaiah expressed it this way: "But a shoot shall grow from the stump of Jesse, and from his root a bud shall blossom. The spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him: a spirit of wisdom and of understanding, a spirit of counsel and of strength, a spirit of knowledge and of fear of the Lord, and his delight shall be the fear of the Lord. Not by appearance shall he judge, nor by hearing shall he decide, but he shall judge the poor with justice, and decide aright for the land's oppressed" (Isaiah 11:1-4).

The prophets used many images to describe the Messiah. He was depicted as a wise ruler, and so many felt he would restore the Israelites to their former freedom and strength. As a result, some people thought the Messiah would compare more to a king than David had. The Israelites would never again be subject to foreigners or be exiled from the Holy Land.

Other prophets described the Messiah as someone who would rule in simplicity, not with pomp. His strength would be a quiet strength, unlike that of pagan rulers. The prophet Zechariah described him like this: "Hasten ye, O daughter Zion, cheer for you, O daughter Jerusalem! See, your king shall come to you, on a colt, the foal of an ass" (Zechariah 9:9).

Isaiah spoke of the Messiah as a prophet, a persuasive teacher like Moses, proclaiming the ways of God to the people: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; He has sent me to bring glad tidings to the lowly, to send the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the oppressed and to give as the prisoners." (Isaiah 61:1).



The Messiah was even said to be someone who would suffer and be rejected by the people, just as Moses and many of the prophets were. People remembered the words of the Psalm and applied them to the Messiah: "All who see me mock me, they spit their lips and say, they shake their heads at me: 'The restful on the

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Discuss what might have happened during that time. Some (usually the wealthier) might have taken up foreign ways to gain favor. The poorer would have become more frustrated and resentful. Stress how there were some who chose to fight and others who sought to seek God's help.

Have the students **read the section "Looking for a Messiah"** on pages 66-67 and drill the students on their understanding of the word *Messiah*.

Focus on the Scripture quotations and ask:

- What is the "shoot from the stump of Jesse"? (*A descendant of his grandson, David*)
- On whom did the Spirit of the Lord rest at His baptism? (*Jesus*)
- Who came to Jerusalem riding on the foal of an ass? (*Jesus*)
- Who was mocked and jeered by those who saw Him? (*Jesus*)

Stress that, when the first followers of Jesus read these prophecies of the Messiah, they saw that they were fulfilled in Him.

Before reading the next section, have the students **brainstorm what they know about John the Baptist**: his parents, his way of life, his activity, his death, his icons. Indicate the Judean Wilderness and the adjoining Jordan River on the red-framed wall map of the Holy Land to show where John lived and baptized.

Background Reading (The Messiah: Jewish Expectations and Interpretations):

"In general, we can say that all Israel was looking for a savior of some kind, but disagreed over his identity and mission (see, for example, the contrasting notions about the Messiah in John 4:25). We can also affirm that people of various opinions looked to the Law, the Prophets and the Psalms for promises, clues and descriptions of their expected Messiah. We will trace a few of the more important directions that Jewish messianic speculation took" (*OTB 107-108*).

5. John the Forerunner

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10070—Did you believe you, if I love you, for him receive you." (John 22:9)

As their foreign masters came and went, the Jews continued to hope that the Messiah would come. They listened to the teachings of the prophets who foretold the coming of the glory of Israel. They remembered the wisdom God had done for them in the past. They were sure that God would send the Messiah to fulfill their hopes.

Christians believe that all these prophecies and more were fulfilled by Jesus. He was born in the family of David and Israel. At His baptism the Holy Spirit came down upon Him in the form of a dove. He was the true and just judge, taking into Jerusalem on a Sunday's rest. He was rejected by the people, mocked and crucified. Like Moses, He maintained a covenant for us with God, the New Covenant in His Blood. And so we call Him the Christ—a Greek translation of the Hebrew word Messiah.

John the Forerunner

The Gospels tell us that about the year 30, John the son of Zachariah began attracting followers by his preaching. He called them to repent because of what was about to happen. "When the Jews from Jerusalem were present and Jesus came to him and John, 'Who are you?' he asked and did not reply. He answered, 'I am your life.' ... In they said to him, 'Who are you, so we can give an answer to those who are asking?' When he saw how to say for yourself" he said. "I am 'the voice of one crying out in the desert. Make straight the way of the Lord.'" (as found in the prophet's text) (John 1:19-21). John saw himself as a forerunner because he had called God before the Messiah to prepare the way for Him. As Jesus Himself would say, "This is the one about whom it is written: 'Behold, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, he will prepare your way before you.'" (Matthew 11:10)

John's Way of Life

In the Gospel of Luke we read that John's father was Zachariah, one of the temple priests. Since the Jewish priesthood was passed from father to son, John was a priest also. But John did not live like other priests or serve in the temple. He lived in the wilderness east of Jerusalem, near the Jordan River. "John wore a clothing made of camel's hair and had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey." (Matthew 3:4). He dressed like the prophet Elijah in 2 Kings 1:8 and lived on an ascetic diet as a way of saying that the Kingdom of God was near and that people should change their way of life.

We do not know how God called John. Like Elijah, he must have had a very intense experience of God to ignore everything else for a life of prayer and fasting. Some of the things that are important to us—enough to eat and drink, nice clothes, a comfortable place to live—



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Read the section and in discussion emphasize the following:

- John insisted the Messiah was coming, but he was only the Messiah's herald. Ask: How do you think John knew the Messiah was coming and Jesus was the Messiah?
- John said that he was fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah of one "crying out in the desert." Ask: When did Isaiah live? Refer the students to the sidebar in Lesson 12 for the answer.
- People followed John into the desert to hear him and even to share his way of life. Ask: What would it take to draw you away from the things we enjoy (TV, video games, etc.) and live as ascetic life?

Stress that John must have experienced God's power to live the way he did and draw people to follow him. Somehow God revealed to him that the Messiah was about to come and called John to baptize people as a sign of their repentance.

Refer the students to the section on page 68, "**John the Forerunner in Our Worship.**" Show how the Church has responded to the Lord's words in the Deisis icon, particularly if there is one in your church.

6. Activity A (Life and Mission of John)

Have the students complete Worksheet A individually or in pairs.

7. Activity B (Feasts of John the Baptist)

Divide the group in two. Have one group read the article on the Birth of John the Baptist (June 24) in Unit Eight, "Our Church Year." Have the second group read the article on his Beheading (August 29). Then have each group teach the other about the feast they have studied.

8. Activity C (*Time Travel Through the Bible*)

View Part Two, Section 3 "John the Voice," (about 13 minutes).

Note that Questions 4 and 5 in the Leader's Guide reflect the Protestant stance against "works" such as asceticism, based on a misreading of Romans. See Fr John Custer, *The Apostolic Writings, a Byzantine Perspective, Chapter 3*, for the more traditional Eastern interpretation of Paul's teaching.

9. Activity D (*Jesse Tree*)

Have the students complete the ornament on the Jesse Tree Worksheet (John the Baptist).

10. Time Line

Refer to the time line poster. Have the students brainstorm the names of people mentioned in this lesson (*Jewish Diaspora, Alexander the Great, King Herod, Zechariah the Priest, John the Forerunner*) and indicate the period in which each lived. Write in the names and dates under each appropriate heading. Reemphasize the idea that John was the "Forerunner," the one who came before Christ to prepare the way for Him.

Background Reading (The Preaching of John):

"Gabriel describes John's task as preparing a people for the Lord (Luke 1:17). This preparation requires people to admit their sinfulness and show real signs of repentance. But even more fundamentally, John's ministry involves shocking people into seeing that God is at work in their lives and that a decisive moment is approaching. All four Gospels (Matthew 3:3; Mark 1:3; Luke 3:4-6; John 1:23) identify John's ministry with reference to the words of Isaiah 40:3: 'A voice cries, "In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God."' ¹ This 'way' seems to be repentance, understood as a way of life.

"But who is the Lord whose herald John is? All four Gospels insist that John the Baptist is Jesus' forerunner. But John's contemporaries could also have understood his ministry on its own terms. John preaches like those OT prophets who called for people to reform and threatened an imminent 'day of the Lord' when God would intervene decisively in the lives of His people. John's message and his baptism 'for repentance' could be understood simply in those terms and accepted by people who looked forward to rather different versions of the 'day of the Lord.' There is nothing explicitly Christian in John's message. He could have been understood as the 'herald' or 'forerunner' for any of the Messiah-figures expected by people in

¹The evangelists simply punctuate Isaiah's words differently to obtain "a voice crying in the wilderness" as a description of John himself. Mark combines Malachi 3:1 with Isaiah 40:3 and attributes the whole to Isaiah.

11. Summary

End the lesson by summarizing the lesson from the aims on page 203, from the elements in the student text on which you focused and/or from any other points raised in the lesson.

12. Closing Prayer

Conclude with the reading of Zechariah's Prayer on page 69 in the student text.

Background Reading (The Preaching of John) (continued):

the first century. John said only that 'someone' greater than he was coming. The 'Lord' for whom John prepares the way - the 'Lord' of Isaiah 40:3 - is ostensibly the Lord, the God of Israel.

"There is, of course, a clear connection between Jesus and John. There is no doubt that John baptized Jesus. Jesus may have spent time in the wilderness with or near John. Jesus flees the wilderness when John is arrested. Jesus' first disciples may have come from John's following. In the popular imagination John and Jesus are always linked and sometimes even confused. Both led lives of itinerant celibate ministry. Both preached repentance as well as the coming of the Kingdom.

"The Gospels insist that John saw himself as the subordinate to someone who would come after him: 'After me comes he who is mightier than I, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit' (Mark 1:8; these words are reproduced almost exactly by Matthew 3:11; Luke 3:16 and John 1:15,26). Information in Acts (18:25; 19:2-3) reinforces this comparison by reporting that those baptized by John still needed to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit from the Apostles. Moreover, John's baptism was 'for repentance' (Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3), an expression of sorrow for sin. But John's baptism could not forgive sins; such forgiveness can be found only in Jesus Christ and derives from His passion and resurrection.

The Gospels explain the relationship between John and Jesus in a variety of ways. According to the fourth Gospel (John 1:32-33) John recognized Jesus, but only after baptizing Him. St Matthew (3:13-15) suggests that John recognized Jesus beforehand and was reluctant to baptize Him.² St Luke's infancy narrative (1:39-41) describes Jesus and John as relatives and shows John recognizing Jesus while both were still in the womb. Yet at the baptism, Luke makes no allusion to any such relationship. Instead, he first reports John's imprisonment (3:19-20) and then narrates Jesus' baptism (3:21) without ever mentioning John at all. These are all different attempts to express the same theological truth. The evangelists must show that Jesus is superior to John and explain why Jesus would accept baptism from John. From prison, John asks for a clear answer to the question of Jesus' identity (Matthew 11:2-6; Luke : 18-23). Perhaps it was only there that he came to understand fully the mystery in which he had participated at the Jordan and the place of his own ministry in God's plan" (*HGB* 41-43).

² Jesus' reassurance to John, "Let it be so now; for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness" (Matthew 3:15) has puzzled ancient and modern interpreters. The Fathers assert that Jesus underwent baptism for us, and so the "righteousness" refers in some sense to the divine plan of our salvation. Being sinless (Hebrews 4:15), Jesus has no need of baptism for Himself. Some Fathers see the fulfillment of all righteousness as Jesus' establishment of Christian baptism by His own example and by sanctifying the nature of water for this purpose by His immersion in the Jordan.

Life and Mission of John the Baptist

Read the following New Testament passages to see what each of the Evangelists says about John.

1. -Announcement of the Birth of John the Baptist (Luke 1:5-22)

v. 13 _____

v. 16 _____

v. 77 _____

v. 20 _____

2. - John's Mission (Mark 1:2-5)

v.3 _____

v.4 _____

3. - Christ Tells Us about John the Baptist (Matthew 11:7-15)

v.9 _____

v. 77 _____

v. 14 _____

4. - St. John Tells Us about Himself (John 3:28-30)

v. 28 _____

v. 30 _____

The Jesse Tree

