



“This is the Story...”

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## **Week 35: The Skies are Opened**

Matthew 3

**Intro Video:** <https://youtu.be/2cLQ178DF5Y>

**Review the big story:** God created the cosmos and humans and called it all good. We were created to live in harmony, but sometimes we miss the mark. All of humanity missed the mark, and they had to live with the consequences, but God stuck with them and continued to love them. Then God called a family to be a blessing to the whole earth. Like the humans before them, the generations of this family often missed the mark, but God was faithful.

When the people became slaves in Egypt, God raised up Moses to be their leader. God delivered them from slavery. In the wilderness, they learned to be a people of God, trusting in God’s provision, living out God’s commandments, and wrestling with the law in shalom community. As they prepared to go into the promised land, they were given the *shema*, words of love to keep with their whole beings. God brought the people into the promised land. There they continued to miss the mark, and God sent judges to guide them.

God raised up prophets, but the people demanded a king. Kings continued to miss the mark, and the kingdom divided into the north and south. God stuck with the people through leaders and prophets, and continued to call the people back to God, even as first the northern, and then the southern kingdom fell to invading powers. Some of the people were sent into exile, and some were left in the ruins of the kingdom. Through prophets and everyday people, God continued to stick with the scattered people and to reveal that God is so much bigger than they imagined. The people were finally able to return to Jerusalem and to rebuild the temple.

As we begin the story of the New Testament, Rome is the power in charge and the people of God are waiting for a Messiah. This Messiah is announced, first with a surprising genealogy, then through an angel to Mary. Mary and Joseph traveled to Bethlehem, and there, Jesus was born, proclaimed by angels, visited by shepherds, blessed by Simeon and Anna, and sought by magi. When Jesus’s life was in danger, his parents fled with him to Egypt, where they remained as refugees until it was safe for them to return and settle in Nazareth. As a child in Nazareth, Jesus grew up in the wisdom of God.

- **Key verses:** Matthew 3:3; Matthew 3:17

**Tell the story:** John the Baptist, cousin of Jesus, was a prophet admired by many who came before Jesus. He told people to change their ways, to stop missing the mark. He told them the kingdom of God was near. He baptized many people. And when Jesus began his ministry, John recognized him and baptized him. As Jesus was baptized, God’s Spirit came upon him and a voice from heaven proclaimed who he was.

- Read Matthew 3
- Read page 177-178 in the *Shine On* story Bible.

## Prime the pump:

- **Things to notice:**
  - Verse 3 refers to Isaiah 40:3, which we read in Week 26!
  - “Cross over Jordan, stones and stones...” - we are back at the Jordan! Reflect back on that story as you read this one.
  - What imagery do you recognize in verses 16-17? Water, heavens opening, a dove...
- **Background information:**
  - Most of us understand baptism as a Christian sacrament/ritual. But it has much deeper roots, and was a common practice of a Jewish sect called the Essenes. Since other parts of John the Baptist's description fit this group, many scholars think he may have been part of this group.
  - Immersion for purification has deep roots in Jewish practice. Look up *mikvah* to learn about practices that continue today. The River Jordan was known as a place of purification.
  - Original hearers would have recognized the words of the voice from heaven as a well-known passage from Genesis 22:2 (God's instructions to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac). Let that soak in.
- **Conversation starters:**
  - John and Jesus's stories parallel each other. Both have miraculous birth stories proclaimed by angels. Both are foretold by prophets, proclaim and draw followers, defy social norms, and end up being killed by the political powers. How did they relate to each other? We don't really know! Search for some articles like [this one](#) to give you food for thought.
  - Read and imagine the conversation between John and Jesus. What is going on here?
  - Imagine being an observer at Jesus' baptism. What would you see? What would you tell your friends later about it?
  - Why did Jesus get baptized? Western Christianity has often defined baptism as necessary for personal salvation. Does this story make you rethink that?

**Microsong:** “The Skies are Opened” (Listen: <https://youtu.be/wfP7Xg48ELk>)

Down by the Jordan the prophet John shouts about change and a God-led life. Jesus asks to be baptized. John protests but Jesus says it's right. Then the skies are opened, a dove descends. A voice from heaven says, “This is my son, the son I love, I'm pleased with him.”

**Sing the big song:** (Listen: <https://youtu.be/A5cYeCPFjwE>)

This is the story of how it all began. God made matter, and chaos shattered.  
Eve and Adam, they tried to hide. The world got violent and God replied with a mark and a flood  
and a rainbow sign, God's love written on skin and sky,  
*And then God called a family to be a blessing to the earth, oh ohhhh*  
A mother and her favorite son wrestle for the blessing, another son becomes a slave, the land is  
saved from famine.  
God's family grows. Egypt oppresses. They groan to God and God sends Moses.  
*Ten strange signs say "Please release them!" By the sea God saves them. Oh ohhh.*  
The people complain and God rains bread. Daily food and ten new rules.  
Five sisters come and ask for land. God says "Yes, amend the law!"  
*Moses says, "In your new life across the Jordan, love God with your whole heart and with all your  
being, and your strength, now listen: God is One, only God! God is One, only God!"*  
Cross over Jordan, stories and stones. Circuits and shouts and the walls come down.  
God sends judges like Deborah and the land has rest.  
Ruth's worth more than seven sons; Redeem the lost with steadfast love.  
Corruption in the temple then God sends Samuel.  
God gives them a prophet, they ask for a king. Does God need a temple? A wise king forgets.  
And when a bully rules the land, the nation tears apart and loses David's heart...  
A widow's gift and a prophet's cry. God brings life in desperate times.  
Josiah reads this misplaced scroll. He turns to God wholeheartedly like David did. In his time.  
God gives Jeremiah a picture of God's ruined family...  
Is there any hope left, is there any hope left, is there any hope left for you, Jerusalem?  
Any hope? Any hope left? Is there any hope left for you?  
By the streams of Babylon, how can we sing when you are gone, Jerusalem...  
I'm in a valley of human bones. These bones are Israel, God's breath is hope.  
Haman plans death for Esther's exiles. She risks her life so they might survive.  
Finally God's family rebuilds the temple in Jerusalem. God plunges them into a sea of joy and  
celebration of Only God. God is One, Only God.  
Comfort to Jerusalem, your warfare finally ceases.  
Matthew lists these generations, Abraham to Jesus  
The angel says, "You'll have a son and God will give him David's throne." Mary says, "God looked  
at me, now I'm the luckiest person around.  
Mary, now pregnant fiancé, makes a grueling journey.  
She has her baby, shepherds see angels declaring God's glory and peace among people.  
The Spirit sends shepherds and elders and prophets to tell those who wait their Messiah has  
come.  
Herod gets nervous, the Magi find Jesus. They hide their discovery and hurry back home...  
Once again an angel comes to Joseph -- so they make good their escape, oooh.  
Jesus in the temple, astonishing the crowd. Jesus with his parents. Jesus growing up.  
Down by the Jordan with the prophet John, Jesus asks to be baptized. And the skies are opened.  
A dove descends. A voice from heaven says, "This is my son, the son I love. I'm pleased  
with him."  
*God loves every one of us, it's true. And God loves the universe.*

**Go do your household project!**