

*Sending*  
in the  
Gospel of John

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# Introduction

The Gospel of John is woven with a powerful thread of divine mission. From its opening chapters to its closing scenes, the language of *sending* echoes again and again. John the Baptist is sent by God to prepare the way for Jesus; Jesus is sent by the Father—to reveal, to speak, to heal, to give life; the Holy Spirit is sent to empower and accompany the disciples; and finally the disciples are sent into the world to continue the work of Jesus. The Greek word *apostolos*, from which we get *apostle*, literally means “one who is sent.” And in a scene rich with symbolism, Jesus sends a man born blind to wash in the pool of Siloam—a name which means “sent”—and the man comes back seeing (Jn 9:7). In this moment, and in so many of Jesus’ words and works, we can see sending as both a movement and a transformation: a commissioning that changes the one who is sent and those to whom they are sent.

This study explores this theme of *sending* in John’s Gospel, from the prophetic callings that prepare the way, to the Father sending his Son, to the Son sending the Holy Spirit and his disciples. Through six sessions, you will deepen your appreciation of this Gospel, grow in awareness of the Church’s mission, and reflect on your own vocation as a disciple sent by Christ into the world.

Session 1 sets the stage by examining four “sending” texts of the Old Testament pertaining to four prophets: Moses (Ex 3–4), Isaiah (Isa 6), Jeremiah (Jer 1), and Ezekiel (Ezek 1–3). Common elements found in these accounts will be compared to the sending of John the Baptist in the following session.

Session 2 looks at the sending of John the Baptist, beginning with two key Old Testament prophecies (Isa 40; Mal 3–4), moving through the nativity account found in Luke’s Gospel (Lk 1) and testimony from Jesus and the evangelists in the Gospel of Matthew (Mt 3; Mt 11), and ending with John’s Gospel (Jn 1–3). In contrasting the sending of John the Baptist with the Old Testament prophets, the uniqueness of Christ’s mission will come into sharper focus.

Sessions 3 and 4 focus on the sending of Jesus, in terms of the purposes for which he was sent (Session 3) and his identity as the Sent One (Session 4). Key passages from John's Gospel are highlighted as representative of these concepts; supporting passages in John and the synoptic Gospels are referenced as well.

Session 5 begins the shift from Jesus *being sent* to Jesus *sending*. This session looks at the sending of the Holy Spirit by the Father and the Son, and the reasons why the Spirit is sent. Excerpts from Luke and Acts complement four crucial Johannine passages.

Session 6 concludes the study with the sending of the disciples (and by extension us) by Jesus. In addition to four selections from John's Gospel that explicitly mention Jesus sending his followers, five additional passages will be presented which establish a pattern of human action flowing from divine action. Together these will define the apostolic mission of the Church, in her first days and today.

The concluding section will summarize the study sessions and present a synthesis of the material, a "little way" of sending, which can act as an examination of conscience, assist in the discernment of a personal apostolate, or serve as a mode of interpretation for Scripture and other spiritual texts. My hope is that this study not only deepens your understanding of Scripture, but also strengthens your own sense of being sent by Christ.

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## Session 1: “Whom shall I send?”

It may seem surprising that a six-part study on John’s Gospel would begin with a session focused entirely on Old Testament texts. But you cannot get very far into any of the Gospels without finding a reference to the Old Testament. In John’s Gospel, his very first words are an unmistakeable callback to the opening of Genesis: “In the beginning.” Therefore, a foundation in these earlier books is not only important but necessary.

In order to appreciate the significance of the sending of John the Baptist we must first consider the calling and sending of prophets in the Old Testament. Four in particular—Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel—have clear narratives of sending that establish a pattern, sharing several features. This pattern will serve as a backdrop for the sending of John<sup>1</sup> in the next session.

After reading the accounts of each of these four Old Testament prophets’ theophanies (visible manifestations of God), consider these three questions: 1) How does the prophet react to God’s call? 2) How does God respond to his reaction? 3) How does God equip the prophet for his mission? Apart from those common questions, each reading has additional questions for comprehension and discernment.

### **Opening Prayer**

Almighty God,

who called and sent prophets in every age  
to speak your word and turn hearts to you,  
place your word upon our lips and in our hearts,  
that we may proclaim your love,  
your mercy, and your righteousness.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,  
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,  
God for ever and ever.

*Amen.*

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<sup>1</sup> John the Baptist (the subject of Session 2) and John the Evangelist (the author of the fourth Gospel) are two different persons.

## Moses (Exodus 3–4)

The book of Genesis ends with Jacob's sons and their families coming to Egypt, living under the protection of Jacob's beloved son Joseph, the pharaoh's second-in-command. But Exodus begins with Joseph and his generation dying, and a new pharaoh coming to power who has no concern for Joseph and his kin, and forces the Hebrews into slavery.

Moses, who was raised in the royal family, fled after he killed an Egyptian who was beating a fellow Hebrew. He started a new life as a shepherd, and while tending his father-in-law's flock at Horeb (Sinai) he has an encounter with God in the midst of the burning bush:

<sup>3:2</sup> The angel of the LORD appeared to Moses in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush; and he looked, and lo, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. <sup>3</sup> And Moses said, "I will turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt."  
<sup>4</sup> When the LORD saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here am I."  
<sup>5</sup> Then he said, "Do not come near; put off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground."  
<sup>6</sup> And he said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

<sup>7</sup> Then the LORD said, ... <sup>10</sup> "Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring forth my people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt." ...

<sup>13</sup> Then Moses said to God, "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?"

<sup>14</sup> God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" ...

<sup>4:10</sup> But Moses said to the LORD, "Oh, my Lord, I am not eloquent ...; I am slow of speech and of tongue." <sup>11</sup> Then the LORD said to him, "Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him dumb, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the LORD? <sup>12</sup> Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak."

<sup>13</sup> But Moses said, "Oh, my Lord, send, I pray, some other person." <sup>14</sup> Then the anger of the LORD was kindled against Moses and he said, "Is there not Aaron, your brother, the Levite? I know that he can speak well. ... <sup>15</sup> You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth; and I will be with your mouth and with his mouth, and will teach you what you shall do."



- 1. How does Moses react to God's call?**
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- 2. How does God respond to Moses' reaction?**
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- 3. How does God equip Moses for his mission?**
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- 4. Moses is called by God, not while he is in Egypt, but when he is far off in Midian. What does this teach us about God's timing in calling us to serve Him?**
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- 5. God's plan for saving the Israelites included Moses' brother Aaron. What does this reveal about the communal nature of service and of being a disciple?**
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- 6. Who has God placed at your side to strengthen your calling?**

## Isaiah (from Isaiah 6)

The book of Isaiah begins with five chapters containing prophecies and visions about Jerusalem and Judah (the southern kingdom of Israel). In the sixth chapter, Isaiah records the vision in which he received his commission to preach.

<sup>6:1</sup> In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and his train filled the temple. <sup>2</sup> Above him stood the seraphim; each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. <sup>3</sup> And one called to another and said:

"Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;  
the whole earth is full of his glory."

<sup>4</sup> And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. <sup>5</sup> And I said: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!"

<sup>6</sup> Then flew one of the seraphim to me, having in his hand a burning coal which he had taken with tongs from the altar.

<sup>7</sup> And he touched my mouth, and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin forgiven." <sup>8</sup> And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Then I said, "Here am I! Send me." <sup>9</sup> And he said, "Go, and say to this people:

"Hear and hear, but do not understand;  
see and see, but do not perceive."

1. How does Isaiah react to God's call?
2. How does God respond to Isaiah's reaction?
3. How does God equip Isaiah for his mission?
4. Compare and contrast Isaiah's experience with Moses': what is similar and what is different?
5. What part of this reading is familiar from the Mass? Does hearing it in its scriptural context change your appreciation for its use in the liturgy?
6. How does Isaiah's confession, and God's cleansing of him, connect with your own experience of reconciliation?

## Jeremiah (from Jeremiah 1)

Jeremiah's encounter with God does not involve miraculous foliage like Moses, nor an earth-shaking vision like Isaiah; it does not leave him dumb-struck on the ground like Ezekiel. Instead, he merely hears or perceives the word of the Lord, like the "still small voice" which Elijah heard in a cave on Mount Horeb (1 Kgs 19:8-12).

The simplicity of Jeremiah's theophany is countered by the sheer weight of the message he receives, that God chose Jeremiah before he was born, that he has no need to fear because God is with him, that the words he will speak will overturn kingdoms and bring about new life.

<sup>4</sup> Now the word of the LORD came to me saying,

<sup>5</sup> "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,  
and before you were born I consecrated you;  
I appointed you a prophet to the nations."

<sup>6</sup> Then I said, "Ah, Lord GOD! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth." <sup>7</sup> But the LORD said to me,

"Do not say, 'I am only a youth';  
for to all to whom I send you you shall go,  
and whatever I command you you shall speak.

<sup>8</sup> Be not afraid of them,  
for I am with you to deliver you,  
says the LORD."

<sup>9</sup> Then the LORD put forth his hand and touched my mouth; and the LORD said to me,

"Behold, I have put my words in your mouth.

<sup>10</sup> See, I have set you this day over nations  
and over kingdoms,  
to pluck up and to break down,  
to destroy and to overthrow,  
to build and to plant."

1. How does Jeremiah react to God's call?
2. How does God respond to Jeremiah's reaction?
3. How does God equip Jeremiah for his mission?
4. God assures Jeremiah that He knew him and consecrated him as a prophet before he was formed in his mother's womb. How does this deepen our understanding of God's call in our own lives?
5. What does God's encouragement teach us about trusting in His strength and presence instead of in ourselves?
6. What obstacles do you find in your life that God does not remove but rather gives you the ability to face?

## Ezekiel (from Ezekiel 1–3)

The prophetic content in the book of Ezekiel is often overshadowed by its fantastical imagery of living creatures and wings and faces and eyes and wheels within wheels. After the first of his visions, Ezekiel receives a powerful call to prophesy to a hard-hearted people that concludes with an intensely Eucharistic image.

1:1 The heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God. ...

28 I fell upon my face, and I heard the voice of one speaking.

2:1 And he said to me, "Son of man, stand upon your feet, and I will speak with you." 2 And when he spoke to me, the Spirit entered into me and set me upon my feet; and I heard him speaking to me. 3 And he said to me, "Son of man, I send you to the people of Israel, to a nation of rebels, who have rebelled against me; they and their fathers have transgressed against me to this very day. 4 The people also are impudent and stubborn: I send you to them; and you shall say to them, 'Thus says the Lord GOD.' 5 And whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house) they will know that there has been a prophet among them.

6 "And you, son of man, be not afraid of them, nor be afraid of their words, though briers and thorns are with you and you sit upon scorpions; be not afraid of their words, nor be dismayed at their looks, for they are a rebellious house. 7 And you shall speak my words to them, whether they hear or refuse to hear; for they are a rebellious house.

8 "But you, son of man, hear what I say to you; be not rebellious like that rebellious house; open your mouth, and eat what I give you."

9 And when I looked, behold, a hand was stretched out to me, and lo, a written scroll was in it; 10 and he spread it before me; and it had writing on the front and on the back, and there were written on it words of lamentation and mourning and woe.

3:1 And he said to me, "Son of man, eat what is offered to you; eat this scroll, and go, speak to the house of Israel." 2 So I opened my mouth, and he gave me the scroll to eat. 3 And he said to me, "Son of man, eat this scroll that I give you and fill your stomach with it." Then I ate it; and it was in my mouth as sweet as honey. 4 And he said to me, "Son of man, go, get you to the house of Israel, and speak with my words to them."

1. How does Ezekiel react to God's call?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. How does God respond to Ezekiel's reaction?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. How does God equip Ezekiel for his mission?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4. God tells Ezekiel repeatedly that the people to whom He is sending him are rebellious and stubborn. What does this teach us about perseverance in sharing and living God's word?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
5. What can the scroll, which tasted "sweet as honey" but bore a heavy message, teach us about the joys and struggles of living by God's word?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
6. How can we "eat the scroll" in our lives, making God's word not just something heard but something that becomes part of us?

## Closing Thoughts

There is a change across these four readings in God's intervention to equip those He has chosen to be His prophets. Review your answers to Question 2 in the preceding pages to see if you notice the progression:

- God **teaches Moses words** to say and promises **to be with his mouth**.
- An angel **purifies Isaiah's lips** and God **gives him words** to say.
- God puts forth His hand and **touches Jeremiah's lips, placing His words within his mouth**.
- God **feeds Ezekiel a scroll containing the message** he is to deliver, enabling him to **speak God's words**.

God's actions slowly shift from the abstract (teaching, promising) to the concrete (touching, feeding His words), while also becoming more richly symbolic. It is as if God's word is taking form, becoming "physical." This should not surprise us if we recall that John's Gospel announces that "In the beginning was the *Word*" (Jn 1:1) and that "the Word *became flesh* and dwelt among us" (Jn 1:14).

In the next session, we will see how the call of John the Baptist, "a man sent from God" (Jn 1:6), breaks the mould of these Old Testament calls, setting the stage for the manifestation of the Word of God.

### Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father,  
    who feed us not by bread alone,  
    but by every word that proceeds from your mouth,  
send your people forth  
    to walk in your presence,  
    to proclaim your truth,  
    and to bear witness to your love.  
We ask this through Christ our Lord.  
*Amen.*



