The Dove Descended at the River Jordan

The Dove Descended at the River Jordan — John the Baptist Skit (20 min)

WHAT

The river Jordan is jammed shoulder to shoulder. John has been baptizing since dawn. A Pharisee, a tax collector, a Roman soldier, a young couple, and a child afraid of the water all step into the line. Each one has a different reason for being there and a different sin to leave in the current. John speaks to each of them by name. Mid-morning, a delegation of priests arrives from Jerusalem to interrogate him — Who are you? Are you Elijah? Are you the prophet? Are you the Messiah? In the middle of their cross-examination, Jesus walks down the bank and asks to be baptized. The line falls quiet. The dove descends. The voice from heaven speaks. Everyone hears it. Nobody moves for a long time.

THEME

When the dove descends, the river goes quiet. The voice from heaven still speaks where the water meets the willing.

WHO

JOHN — Camel-hair coat. Knee-deep in the river since sunrise. Voice strained but still strong. Every baptism takes something out of him and gives something back.

LEAH — John's helper on the bank. Twenties. Hands towels, speaks gently to people in line, watches her teacher with awe and worry.

REUBEN — A Pharisee. Late forties. Came down at dawn alone, in plain clothes. Has not told his colleagues.

ZACCHAEUS-LIKE TAX COLLECTOR (TAVI) — A tax collector from a nearby town. Forties. Carries a leather pouch and a guilty face.

CORNELIUS — A Roman soldier off-duty, in plain tunic. Thirties. Stationed in Galilee. Has been listening to the voice in the wilderness for weeks.

DANIEL — A young husband. Twenties. Newly married. Holds his wife's hand the entire scene.

RACHEL — Daniel's wife. Twenties. Pregnant. Quiet. Brave.

YONA — A child. Eight. Afraid of the water. Holding her grandmother's hand.

SAVTA — Yona's grandmother. Late sixties. Patient as a stone.

PRIEST AMOS — Head of the delegation from Jerusalem. Sixties. Speaks slowly. Watches everything.

PRIEST HEZRON — Younger priest. Forties. Sharper. The lawyer of the group.

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JESUS — Walks down the bank. Linen tunic. Quiet. Steady. Asks for baptism with the same plain voice He will later use on storms.

VOICE FROM HEAVEN — Offstage. The Father. Spoken plainly.

HOW (STYLE / TONE)

A long sloping bank suggested by a low platform. A shallow basin of real water stage left for the baptism beats. A line of people forms along the back edge of the platform, real bodies throughout — their reactions are the audience's reactions. JOHN works in the water, never sits. LEAH works the bank. The priests enter and stand on a slightly higher rock or step at stage right. Lighting stays even and bright until JESUS enters; then the river light shifts, slowly, almost imperceptibly, until the moment of the dove. The dove can be a piece of white silk lowered on a fishing line, a paper cutout on a slow gimbal, or a pure cue of warm light — choose what your stage can hold.

PROPS

- A shallow basin or pool of real water, ankle-deep
- A pile of clean linen towels on the bank
- A small wooden chest for the bank station
- A leather coin pouch for Tavi
- A simple plain-clothes tunic for Cornelius (no military insignia)
- A small wooden charm for Yona to clutch
- A walking staff for Savta
- Two priests' robes and head coverings (Amos and Hezron)
- A scroll for the priests to consult
- A piece of white silk on a fishing line, or warm light cue, for the dove
- John's camel-hair coat and leather belt

TIME

20 minutes

Scene 1 — Sunrise on the Jordan

(Lights up cool morning blue on the river bank. JOHN stands knee-deep in the water, arms loose. LEAH crouches on the bank folding linen. The line of people has not yet formed, but voices begin offstage.)

NARRATOR: John records that this happened in Bethany beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing. The line started before dawn. By the time the sun was over the hills, it was longer than the road.

JOHN (to the water, to himself)

Father. Another day. Another line. I do not know how many more I have. Make me say what You want said. Make me know Him when He comes.

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LEAH (gently, from the bank)
Teacher. The first ones are coming.

JOHN
Send them down.

Scene 2 — The Pharisee in Plain Clothes

(REUBEN steps cautiously onto the bank, a hood pulled forward over his head. He looks side to side. He does not see anyone he knows. He approaches LEAH.)

REUBEN (low)
Is it true. That the teacher will baptize anyone.

LEAH
Anyone who comes confessing. Yes.

REUBEN
Even — even one of us.

LEAH (smiling, no judgment)
Especially one of you. Step into the water, sir. He will know what to ask.

(Reuben walks slowly down to the water. He pushes the hood off his head. JOHN sees him. JOHN's face does something small and surprised and kind.)

JOHN
A Pharisee.

REUBEN
In plain clothes. The others would not understand.

JOHN
I will not tell them.

REUBEN
I have been reading Isaiah for forty years. I have been reading the prophets like men read receipts. I have been correcting other men's grammar. I have been sure I was the priest of my own house. I have not been sure of God in a long time.

JOHN
Then bear fruit in keeping with repentance, Reuben. Do not say to yourself you have Abraham as your father. God is able to raise up children of Abraham from these stones. Come.

(Reuben steps into the water. John lays a hand on his head. Reuben goes under. He comes up gasping, then laughing, then crying. He cannot decide which. John holds him steady.)

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REUBEN
Oh — oh, that was cold. That was cold.

JOHN
Forgiveness is cold the first time. Walk in it a while. It warms.

Scene 3 — Tavi the Tax Collector

(TAVI shuffles down to the bank, leather pouch heavy at his hip. He keeps his eyes on the dirt. LEAH straightens to greet him.)

TAVI
I — I am a tax collector. From Jericho. I — I do not know if you take my kind.

LEAH
He takes everyone, sir.

TAVI
I have a pouch full of money. I do not know what to do with it. Some of it is mine. Some of it I took. Some of it I cannot tell anymore.

LEAH
Tell the teacher.

(Tavi steps into the water. He stands in front of John with his eyes still down.)

JOHN
Tax collector. What is your name.

TAVI
Tavi.

JOHN
What should we do, Tavi.

TAVI
I have asked that question every morning for two years. I do not have an answer.

JOHN
Collect no more than what you have been ordered to. That is your answer for tomorrow. The day after, ask Him for the next one.

TAVI
Him.

JOHN
He is coming. Sooner than you think.

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(Tavi nods. He goes under the water. He comes up with his eyes closed. He stands a long moment with the water dripping from his beard.)

TAVI (quietly)

I will give half of it back.

JOHN

Begin with that.

Scene 4 — The Soldier

(CORNELIUS approaches in plain tunic, no insignia, shoulders straight in spite of himself. The line shifts a little when they realize who he is. LEAH does not flinch.)

CORNELIUS

I am a soldier. I left the helmet at home. I do not know if your prophet receives men like me.

LEAH

He receives men like you. Step down, sir.

(Cornelius walks into the water. He stops in front of John. He looks the prophet square in the face like a man making a report.)

CORNELIUS

I have heard you, prophet. From up the hill. The voice carries. I have heard you say that the kingdom of heaven is near. I do not know what that means for a Roman, but I am here.

JOHN

Soldier. What should you do.

CORNELIUS

I expected you to tell me to give up the sword.

JOHN

Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation. Be content with your wages.

CORNELIUS

That is — that is it.

JOHN

That is it for today, soldier. The One coming after me will say the rest.

(Cornelius nods. He goes under the water. He stays under one beat longer than the others. He comes up with his eyes wet.)

CORNELIUS (to himself)

I will be content.

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Scene 5 — Daniel and Rachel

(DANIEL leads RACHEL down the bank, holding her hand. She is visibly pregnant. They stop at the edge of the water together.)

DANIEL

Teacher. We are newly married. There is a baby coming. We want to start clean. We want this child to be born to two parents who have walked through your river.

JOHN

Come down together. The water is wide enough for both.

(They step in side by side. John lays a hand on each of their heads.)

JOHN

You are bringing a life into a world that does not always make room for new things. Make room in your house for the One who is making everything new. Then your child will know what room looks like.

RACHEL (very softly)

Yes, teacher.

(They go under one at a time. Each comes up holding the other's hand. They walk back up the bank without letting go.)

Scene 6 — Yona and the Water

(SAVTA leads YONA down the bank slowly. Yona is dragging her feet. She clutches a small wooden charm. She is whispering to her grandmother.)

YONA

Savta. I do not want to. The water is too big.

SAVTA

The water is not too big, child. Your fear is too big. We will make it smaller together.

LEAH (kneeling to Yona's height)

Hello, friend. What is your name.

YONA

Yona.

LEAH

Yona. Like the prophet who got swallowed by a fish.

YONA

I do not want to be swallowed by anything.

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LEAH

Nothing is going to swallow you, Yona. The teacher will hold your head. The water will only come up to your shoulders. Your savta will stand right here.

(Yona looks up at JOHN, who is squatting low in the water now, his arms open.)

JOHN

Yona. Will you come.

YONA

Will you let me hold the charm.

JOHN

You can hold the charm. The charm cannot hold you. But I can. And the One coming behind me holds the whole river.

(Yona walks very slowly into the water. JOHN takes her hand. She closes her eyes. He lowers her gently. She comes up sputtering, eyes wide. Then she laughs.)

YONA

Savta. I did it.

SAVTA

You did it, child. The water is smaller now.

Scene 7 — The Priests Arrive

(PRIEST AMOS and PRIEST HEZRON step onto the rock at stage right, robes immaculate, scroll under Hezron's arm. The line of people parts to let them through. The atmosphere shifts.)

AMOS

We have come from Jerusalem. We are sent by the council. We have questions for the man baptizing in this river.

JOHN (still in the water)

Then ask, sir.

HEZRON (unrolling the scroll)

We will be brief. The council needs to know with whom it is dealing. Are you the Christ?

JOHN

I am not the Christ.

HEZRON

Are you Elijah?

JOHN

I am not.

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HEZRON

Are you the Prophet that Moses spoke of?

JOHN

No.

AMOS

Then who are you. We must give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?

JOHN (turning to face them squarely)

I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness — Make straight the way of the Lord — as the prophet Isaiah said.

Scene 8 — The Cross-Examination

HEZRON

Then why are you baptizing if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?

JOHN

I baptize with water. But among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.

AMOS (slowly)

Among us. Now.

JOHN

Among you now.

(Hezron and Amos look at each other. Hezron looks at the line. Amos looks at the bank. Neither sees Him yet.)

HEZRON

Show us.

JOHN

I do not have to show you, priest. He will walk down the bank in His own time and you will see Him with your own eyes.

AMOS

And what do we tell the council.

JOHN

Tell them you met a voice. Tell them the voice told you to get out of the road.

(Hezron starts to write. Amos puts his hand on the scroll to stop him. The line murmurs. The river is loud.)

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Scene 9 — Jesus Walks Down the Bank

(From upstage right, slowly, JESUS walks down the path to the riverbank. Linen tunic, sandals, no entourage. He stops at the edge of the water. The line goes quiet by accident — nobody decides to be quiet, they just are. JOHN sees Him and goes very still.)

JOHN (very softly)

Behold. The Lamb of God. Who takes away the sin of the world.

(Reuben, who has not yet left, turns slowly. Tavi turns. Cornelius turns. Daniel and Rachel turn. Yona looks up at Savta and Savta lifts her chin. The priests stop arguing. Even Hezron lowers his scroll.)

JESUS

John. I have come to be baptized by you.

JOHN

I need to be baptized by You. And do You come to me?

JESUS

Let it be so now. For thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.

(John bows his head. He walks slowly through the water to where Jesus stands at the edge. He extends his hand. Jesus steps into the river.)

Scene 10 — The Dove Descends

(JOHN places his hand very gently on the back of JESUS' head. Jesus lowers Himself into the water. The line on the bank does not breathe. Jesus rises out of the water. Lights begin to warm — slowly, slowly. The river-blue is still there, but a column of warm light begins to find Jesus' shoulders.)

(From above, the dove descends — a piece of white silk, a soft cutout, a single beam of warm light, whatever the stage holds. It comes to rest at the level of Jesus' head. The bank is utterly silent.)

VOICE FROM HEAVEN (offstage, plain, unhurried)

This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.

(Nobody moves. Yona's hand tightens on her wooden charm. Reuben's hood falls all the way back. Tavi's leather pouch slides off his shoulder. Cornelius lowers himself to one knee in the dirt. Hezron's scroll drops. Amos sits down heavily on the rock. The priests do not look at each other. They look at the river.)

Scene 11 — The River Holds Its Breath

(Jesus turns slowly to John. He nods once. He walks up the bank, water streaming off Him, and disappears the way He came. The lights stay warm a long beat after He has gone. The line of people stands very still. Nobody moves to the next place

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in line. Nobody fixes their hair. Nobody clears their throat. The river is the loudest thing in the world.)

JOHN (to no one and everyone)

I told you. I told you He was here. I told you the strap of His sandal was beyond me. I told you the kingdom of heaven was at hand. The hand has come down, friends. The hand has come down.

REUBEN (quietly)

We did not believe you. The whole council talked you down at suppers for a year. They called you a noise. I sat at those tables. I held my cup and said nothing.

JOHN

Believe me now, Pharisee. Hold your cup tonight and say something.

REUBEN

I believe you, prophet. I believe you.

(John turns to the priests on the rock. They do not stand. Amos is staring at the water as if the water is going to apologize to him for being so loud about it.)

AMOS (slowly, looking at his own hands)

What do we tell the council. They sent us with a list of yes-or-no questions. They did not send us prepared for a dove.

JOHN

Tell them what you saw, Amos. The dove. The voice. The Lamb. Tell them the kingdom of heaven walked down a riverbank in a linen tunic this morning, and a country priest who eats locusts put a hand on the head of God.

HEZRON

They will not believe us. They will say we were tired. They will say the sun was bright.

JOHN

They did not believe me either. Tell them anyway. The kingdom does not wait for the council to vote on it.

AMOS (very softly)

Hezron. Write it down. Write down the words from the sky. Write down what the prophet said. Write it now, before we are out of this river-light and back among the lamps of Jerusalem.

(Hezron lifts his scroll back up off the rock. His hand shakes a little. He writes.)

Final Moment — The Line Stays

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(Lights settle. JOHN turns back to the line. The line has not gone. Reuben stays standing in the shallows, wet to his knees. Tavi sits on the bank counting coins out of his pouch into a smaller pile. Cornelius stays on one knee. Daniel and Rachel stand with their hands on Rachel's belly. Yona is already drawing with her finger in the wet sand. Savta watches her.)

LEAH (softly, to the line)

Friends. The teacher will keep baptizing. The line is open. The One you came to meet has come and gone, but the river is still here. So is the voice. So is the way.

(JOHN steps a little deeper into the water. He raises his arms. The line shifts. The next person walks slowly down the bank toward him. The lights hold warm on the water. Slowly — slowly — the lights dim, except on the wet sand where Yona is drawing. She is drawing a dove. Lights down.)

END

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