

JOHN: THE ROAD THROUGH LIFE'S WILDERNESS

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By Pastor Stan

Luke 3:1-7

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INTRO.

-- Back in the 1980s and 90s the CBS Evening News had a segment called "On the Road with Charles Kuralt." Kuralt was a journalist who traveled around the country in an RV going to small communities usually by-passed by the major networks to do human-interest stories about ordinary people who would never make the evening news. Kuralt had a tough time selling the idea to the CBS news executives, and the idea was approved for just a three-month trial run. It was an instant success, and its run was extended - for 25 years!

-- For this Christmas/Advent season we'll transform our sanctuary into a combination RV and time machine, and we'll go "on the road" to meet some of those in the Christmas story. Most of the ones we'll meet will be traveling the road to Bethlehem, but to meet the man we start with this morning we'll have to travel the road into the wilderness. His name is John ben Zechariah, but we know him as John the Baptist, and his story starts in Luke 1.

Luke 1 (p. 855)

I. John & the Christmas Story

A. John doesn't seem to fit the Christmas story.

1. I suspect that most of us never associate John the Baptist with the Christmas story. He never appears in a Nativity scene, and I doubt that you've ever seen him in a Christmas play. Yet Luke starts his Gospel by connecting together the stories about the birth of John the Baptist and the birth of Jesus.

2. Luke begins his Gospel with an appearance of the angel Gabriel - not to a young virgin named Mary but to an elderly priest named Zacharias. Gabriel announces that Zacharias and his aged and barren wife, Elizabeth, are finally going to become parents. They will have a son, whom they are to name John and who will be the forerunner, preparing the way for the coming of the Messiah.

3. Then six months later Gabriel appears to the young virgin Mary to announce that she has been chosen to be the one who will give birth to Christ, the Messiah. And Gabriel tells Mary that her cousin Elizabeth is already six months pregnant. The first thing Mary does after Gabriel's visit is to go to see her pregnant cousin, Elizabeth; and as soon as Mary greets Elizabeth, the prenatal John leaps inside Elizabeth's womb.

4. So, you see that John the Baptist is very much connected to the Christmas story; yet, somehow he doesn't seem to fit. After all, the Christmas story is about a baby and a star, about shepherds and sheep, about wise men and gifts. John is like poet Robert Bly's "Iron John" - he's the "wild man" who roams around the wilderness wearing camel hair tunics and calling people sinners and telling them to repent - he's like the relative that you hope doesn't show up for the Thanksgiving dinner. Nothing about John seems to fit in our picture of the Christmas story.

B. John's Message & Purpose

-- Yet Luke says that John was the fulfillment of a prophecy connected to the Messiah and made 600 years earlier by the prophet Isaiah.

Cf., 3:1-9

-- John's message wasn't delivered to people sitting in living room recliners; it wasn't even delivered to people in church pews. To hear John's message you had to go out into the Judean wilderness, a hot rocky, barren desert. John's purpose wasn't to comfort people but to get them ready to meet the Lord.

II. The Main Lesson

-- Now, here's the main thing I want us to get this morning as we go on the road to see and hear John the Baptist:

It often takes a trip into the wilderness to prepare us to receive the Lord.

-- We often have to go through a difficult wilderness-like experience before we recognize our need for the Lord and open our lives to receive Him.

A. Biblical Examples

-- It's interesting how often the Bible associates the wilderness with preparing people to meet or turn to the Lord.

1. Moses

-- Moses escaped to the wilderness to hide from Pharaoh, and over the next 40 years God shaped and prepared Moses as he tended sheep in the Sinai wilderness. And it was in that wilderness that God made Himself known to Moses and called him to lead the Jewish people out of their bondage in Egypt.

2. Israel

-- And it took 40 years of wandering in the wilderness to teach Israel how to depend on the Lord and to prepare them to conquer the Promised Land.

3. David

-- David had to flee to the wilderness to hide out from King Saul. It was in the wilderness that David learned how to depend on God.

Cf., **Psalm 63:1, 6-8** [A psalm of David when he was in the wilderness of Judah] **1** O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. ... **6** when I remember you upon my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night; **7** for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I will sing for joy. **8** My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me.

-- God sent the prophet Samuel to anoint David as king while David was still living with his father, but God had to send David into the wilderness to prepare him to become king.

4. Elijah

-- Elijah, the great prophet who confronted and defeated the prophets of the false god Baal on Mt. Carmel just a few hours later ran from the wicked queen Jezebel when she threatened to retaliate and kill him. Elijah ran out into the wilderness and in despair prayed to die. Instead, God met with Elijah in that wilderness and spoke to him in the still small voice and sent him back to confront Queen Jezebel and King Ahab and to finish the work that God had for him to do.

5. John the Baptist

-- Even John the Baptist had to go through his own wilderness experience.

Cf., 3:19-20

Matthew 11:2-3 Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples **3** and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?"

-- Everything that John had believed in seemed to be falling apart. John's life purpose had been to prepare the people to receive the Messiah. John had pointed to Jesus and announced confidently, "Behold, the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world." But things had not gone the way John anticipated. John had expected Jesus the Messiah to lay the axe to the root of evil and to bring it down and to establish in its place the Kingdom of God, the kingdom of rightness. But the wicked King Herod was still on the throne, and John, the servant of God, was in the dark, dirty and putrid dungeon. As John languished day after day in the darkness of his prison, he began to have his doubts; so he sent his disciples to Jesus with the question: "Are you the promised Savior, or should we be looking for someone else?"

B. Everyone faces wilderness experiences.

-- We all face wilderness experiences. They may be in the form of a marital or family crisis, or the loss of a job, or a serious accident or illness.

One of the greatest preachers who ever lived was a man named Charles Haddon Spurgeon, who was a Baptist pastor in London, England, in the last half of the 1800s. Spurgeon is often referred to as "the prince of preachers." He was the pastor of London's famous Metropolitan Tabernacle, a mega-church a century before the mega-church movement began. The Tabernacle seated 6,000, and he preached to a packed church for more than 20 years. Spurgeon published over 3,500 sermons and wrote 135 books. He established orphanages and ministries to the poor. But Spurgeon also spent time in the wilderness and battled depression throughout his life.

CONCLUSION

My father came home from World War II and started a very successful business while also attending college on the GI Bill. My sister and I were also born during that time, but while we were still preschool age my father developed a serious mental illness (schizophrenia paranoia, the same illness depicted in the movie A Beautiful Mind). My father never recovered. He had to sell his business, and my mother had to go to work to support the family. As I was growing up, my father was a self-proclaimed agnostic and antagonistic towards

anything related to the church. When I was in high school, God graciously intervened in our family, leading all of us, including my father, to turn to seek and follow Christ. My father, however, continued to struggle with his mental illness. I remember a comment that my father made about his affliction. He said that he thought that one reason God had allowed the mental illness into his life was to bring him to the Lord. As my father explained, if he had never developed the mental illness, he would have continued to pursue life apart from God, a life in which money was his god. But God had allowed my father to experience the mental illness to turn him from the false god of money to the Lord Jesus Christ.

If my father was right, God took my father and our family on the road into the wilderness of mental illness and then led us along that road to bring us to Christ.