

Dr. Lonnie H. Lee

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The Way to Jesus

Matthew 3:1

The season of Advent is our journey to Christmas. This journey goes through John the Baptist and the wilderness he inhabited. All four of the gospels tell us that John appeared in the wilderness to prepare the way for Jesus. John does not come to sing Christmas carols or to decorate a tree or to create a mood of nostalgia. John does not give us the sweet story of angels singing to a babe in the manger. John comes with the more jarring message of repentance. John calls on his listeners to find their way to Jesus by turning away from the destructive patterns of their lives. John makes clear to us that Christmas is not just about giving; it is also about giving up everything which prevents us from receiving the new life that comes with Jesus Christ.¹

The novelist Graham Greene pondered the questions of sin and repentance that John the Baptist emphasized in the wilderness. In his novel, *The End of the Affair*, Greene describes a young woman named Sarah. Sarah is married to Henry but is in love with Maurice. Her affair with Maurice is exciting and delightful but she becomes increasingly burdened by the guilt that is at the center of her life. She gradually forms a vision of a different way to live. She begins to imagine a life that is grounded in fidelity to her husband and fidelity to a God in whom she is struggling to believe.

The turning point comes for Sarah in London during World War II. She is in a hotel room waiting for Maurice. She hears air raid sirens and the horrendous sound of an explosion that is far too close for comfort. She is convinced that Maurice has been killed. She later describes what happened in these words:

I knelt down on the floor. I was mad to do such a thing: I never even had to do it as a child...I hadn't any idea what to say. Maurice was dead. Extinct. There wasn't such a thing as a soul...I knelt and put my head on the bed and wished I could believe. Dear God, I said—why dear, why dear?—make me believe. I can believe. Make me, I said, I'm a (fool) and a fake. I hate myself. I can't do anything of myself. *Make* me believe. I shut my eyes tight...and I said, I will believe. Let him be alive and I *will* believe... So I said, I love him, and I'll do anything if You'll make him alive. Let him be alive... and then he came in the door and he was alive, and I thought, now the agony of being without him starts.²

From that moment Sarah's life is different. She ends the affair and returns to her husband. A new and living faith is planted in her heart. It is a journey of repentance. The way to Jesus goes through John the Baptist. Christmas is not just about giving; it is also about giving up.

This is the issue that was at the heart of a dispute between John the Baptist and some of the religious leaders of Israel. One of the more surprising events of John's ministry came the day that a group of Pharisees and Sadducees presented themselves for baptism. It is not clear from the text what motivated these sophisticated religious leaders to seek the baptism of John. But John is convinced that they have not come in a spirit of repentance. He calls them a brood of vipers and tells them to bear fruit worthy of repentance. John will not baptize them because he does not believe that they are ready to

turn their lives around. For them baptism could be nothing more than a confirmation of their goodness. It was just one more way of confirming their positions of power in that society.

The Pharisees and Sadducees who come to John are heavily invested in the *status quo*. They benefit greatly from the religious system in which they have become leaders. As long as that establishment is secure they don't have to worry about their future. But John calls these religious leaders to come to terms with the truth that the religious system which protects them is under the judgment of God. God is not bound by the structures of the past. God can raise up a new people from the very stones on which they are standing. The time has come for them to repent of their privileged positions, to give up the power they love so much, and go to the wilderness to meet God. The way to Jesus is through the wilderness of John the Baptist. Christmas is not just about giving. It is also about giving up.

The discovery of this truth was the turning point in life of an Irish nobleman named Columba. Columba was born into the warrior aristocracy of Ireland in 521 AD. He was in fact a prince who would have the opportunity to be a contender to be the high king of the realm of Dalriada which included the Northern portion of Ireland and the western isles of Scotland.

From childhood Columba was trained by a scholarly priest in the newly established church in Ireland. He quickly developed a great love of books and a strong aptitude for learning. With his noble background, his sharp intellect, and his solid connections in the church, Columba seemed destined for an important leadership role in Irish society. But by 561 something happened which changed the trajectory of Columba's life. The trouble began with Columba's passion for books which were scarce in that society. Some sources say that he surreptitiously copied a book of Psalms without the permission of the owner. In that primitive society books were seen to have unusual powers. Making a copy was no trivial matter. When Columba refused to give back his copy to the owner a complaint was filed with the High King. In the end Columba lost one of the first copyright infringement cases in recorded history.³

The ruling against Columba set off a chain reaction of politically charged events. In a warrior society a controversy like this can easily spiral into bloodshed. This is exactly what happened. Small skirmishes soon escalated into major battles. The casualties were appalling. It is not clear what Columba's role was in this bloodletting. But when it was all over, his reputation as a church leader was damaged beyond repair.

Columba repented of his part in this great historical tragedy. He gave up his privileged position as Prince of Dalriada and he went into exile. He left the center of power of that society to travel to its most isolated region, the western isles of Scotland. There he settled on an uninhabited island called Iona. On that deserted island Columba embraced the wilderness that the Pharisees and Sadducees could not confront.

In that wilderness many found the way to Jesus. The community that formed around Columba brought a powerful spiritual transformation to Scotland and beyond. The journey to Christmas can do the same for us. This journey takes us through the wilderness of John the Baptist where God is waiting to make us new.

Endnotes

1. I am indebted to David Bartlett for his understanding of John the Baptist's preaching as a call to give up what prevents us from making the journey to Christ in a sermon published by *Journal For Preachers*, Advent, 2010.
2. Quoted by David Bartlett, *Journal For Preachers*, Advent 2010, page 22.
3. *The Sword and the Cross: Four Turbulent Episodes in the History of Christian Scotland*, pages 6-10).