



Maybe your marginal experience this Christmas will involve a long time in an airport after a flight is canceled, and you are forced to just sit and listen. Maybe it will mean finding the stocking of someone who died this year. Maybe it will come late at night as you sit alone staring at the lights on the tree. Just don't run from the experience before you listen for the still, small voice.

One Christmas, the word from God came to me as I was rushing past some Christmas carolers. I was in a hurry because I had planned to finish my shopping. But my daughter wanted to stop and listen. At first I waited with her impatiently, but then I noticed the girl with Down syndrome playing the triangle for the carolers. Every time the conductor pointed to her to ring her instrument, her smile was so big that I thought I saw all the stars of heaven proclaiming glory to God in the highest heaven. I've never been rid of that little girl. Every Christmas I remember her smile and the holy dream of joy to all the earth. Sometimes it's the more humble parts of earth that have to teach the dream to those of us who are rushing past the places of glory.

Another Christmas, the still, small voice came when I left the Christmas Eve service to go to an empty home where I was alone. Some of you, I realize, have lived with this experience for many years, but this was my first time to be alone on Christmas Eve for a very long time. I had planned to work myself to a frazzle so I couldn't think about it. But that night when I finally got home, I slung into a chair. The silent night then became a holy night for me. I could have sworn I heard an angel say, "The virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call him Emmanuel, which means God is with us." When you believe that, when you believe that you are not really alone, any dream is possible. But I had to go to the margins to believe.

Everyone's experience of Christmas this year will include both careful plans and unexpected moments that lie on the margins of those plans. If you wish to follow John the Baptist's admonition to "Prepare the way of the Lord," then you need to be prepared most of all to hear what you can only hear on the margins of Christmas. That's because the way of the Lord is not often our way. And he likes to make his Christmas gifts a surprise.

Benediction: O Coming Savior, give us the courage to remain silent long enough to confront the truth about our need for salvation, more salvation than we know, until at last your holy dreams have become our dreams as well. Amen.

Luke 3:1-6

Prepare the Way of the Lord

3. Getting It Straight This Year

M. Craig Barnes

I am continuing in a series of Advent sermons on John the Baptist. Today we come to the beginning of his ministry.

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I love Christmas. I love its energy, beauty, and its music. I love the reunions with family and friends, the decorations, and even all of the fuss that comes with the season. I hate to admit this, but I've never been as bothered by the tinsel and commercialization of the season as I'm supposed to be. It seems to me that maxing out our credit cards to give presents to those we love is not our greatest sin, and as for the tinsel, well, I believe shopping malls need all they can get. But most of all, I love the aspirations of Christmas. This is a season in which we get rather serious about our dreams for hope, love, joy, and peace on earth.

At Christmas it's impossible to ignore the soul's longings for these gifts from Christ. For a few weeks at least, we all dare to believe again that miracles can happen, and we think that maybe, maybe, the hope, love, joy, and peace of the season will take permanent root. That is what has brought us to worship. We are here, like John the Baptist, to prepare the way for Christ Jesus and his exquisite Christmas gifts.

So let us turn our attention now to the third chapter of Luke where we are introduced to John's ministry. Notice that Luke begins his introduction of John by providing a list of famous names from the first century. First, he tells us about the Roman Emperor Tiberius, and then Pontius Pilate the governor of Judea. (We'll meet him again in a few months.) Next, he mentions Herod the ruler of Galilee, his brother Philip, who ruled the region east of the Jordan River, and Lysanias who ruled the region to the north. Finally, Luke tells us about Annas and Caiaphas, the high priests in Jerusalem.

This is the list of the most powerful men in society at the time. They provided political leadership, economic leadership, and religious leadership. They were the ones we expected to take us into a future filled with hope. So, isn't it striking that, after listing these names, the very next thing Luke writes is, "the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah in the wilderness."

Whenever the word of God came in biblical times, it usually came through people who had little power or influence but who had learned to listen to God. This would include people like John the Baptist who could rekindle our great dreams for life because he found them out in the wilderness, on the margins of life. That is why John was great—he knew how to find a dream.

Henry David Thoreau wrote, "Nations have great men and women only in spite of themselves. In fact, nations direct all their efforts to not having them. Thus, great people must have, in order to exist, a force of attack greater than the force of resistance developed by their society." What he means by this provocative quote is that, in spite of its fascination with leadership, and especially the newest face in the game, society has always encouraged bureaucratic mediocrity rather than greatness. That is because great people are motivated by dreams, and society cannot give us dreams. It gives us only plans: political plans, economic plans, and religious plans, many of which are well-worn. We need plans, of course, and it is hard to get much done without one, but you never want to confuse a plan with a dream.

Dreams are the things angels bring us, and they usually come as an interruption of our plans. Most of us have far too many plans and not nearly enough dreams. That is why we have trouble with hope. We have worked our way through so many plans, and none of them can still inspire us. We have tried educational plans and job plans, diet plans, retirement plans, exercise plans, and when we ran out of plans for ourselves, we started making plans for our children. But every time we launch into the next building plan for our lives, we know that this one is not going to put life together for us any better than the discarded plans did. It is the dreams that give life hope. Not the plans.

Often when someone comes to talk to me about their faith, I find that there is a particular struggle or block to their ability to believe. But over the years this struggle with faith has changed. It used to be that the obstacle to faith was intellectual doubts. No more. Now people are prevented from believing more by their despair. And the despair isn't just spiritual. I find

that they expect little from politics about which it is stylish to be cynical, from the economy that is never good enough, and from organized religion that is preoccupied with little issues. But since at least the first century, politics, economics and religion were supposed to be the building plans for hope. It just isn't working. It never has. Again, only a dream provides hope, and our society does not know how to give us dreams.

Some people try to forget about dreams and content themselves with the next plan for the next thing that won't satisfy. "Maybe I'll trade my car in on a new model." But at Christmas something in all of our souls emerges again in search of a dream. Not knowing how to discover worthy dreams, we do what we know—we plan to make a dream come true. And that brings us back to politics, economics, and religion.

Christmas is very political. Every family has lots of laws for how to celebrate, when to celebrate, who is at the celebration, where and in what rooms to celebrate. Changing any of these traditions requires the sharpest of political savvy. Christmas is also economic. The nation's economy would come to a grinding halt without it, which is an ironic way of celebrating the birth of a child in a stable. And I expect Christmas also involves some religious plans, even for the secularists among us.

As society has always done, we try to use these plans to build our way to hopeful dreams. Just as Luke begins his third chapter by telling us about Tiberius, Pilate, Herod, and the high priests, you could begin your Christmas letter by describing all your careful plans that worked and didn't work out over the last year. Then, you could move to the Christmas plans: you've got the house decorated, the tree up, the travel arranged, and all the shopping and baking completed.

These plans are not wrong. In fact, they are quite necessary at Christmas. But if it's a word from God you want, if you are hoping to get a sacred dream for Christmas, and if you would love to behold a miracle, it may just come on the margins of all these plans. Luke is very clear about this. The word of God came not to the normal places where it was expected. It came to John, the son of Zechariah, in the wilderness.

The wilderness is always seen in the Bible as a marginal place, away from the noise and busyness of society. It is a place quiet enough to hear God's still, small voice. Every Christmas has a little wilderness lying on the margins. It's the thing that is unexpected, unplanned, and maybe even unwanted initially. You need to pay close attention to these marginal experiences at Christmas because holy things happen best there.

