

It is known as the Wilderness Road. Consisting of a 200 mile loop from Virginia to Tennessee and northward to Kentucky, it passed through the rugged terrain of Cumberland Gap and became passage for thousands willing to brave its challenges in search of a new life. Daniel Boone, credited with hewing the trail into Kentucky, advised certain essentials for any who would attempt it: "A good gun, a good horse, and a good wife." A strong body, a sharp ax, salt to preserve meat, and good luck were also helpful. The road, or more accurately, the muddy *trail*, held out great promise for any who would attempt it; but it posed great danger as well. Hostile Native American tribes, panthers, wild cats, copperheads and rattlesnakes and dense undergrowth that had to be beaten back every step of the way meant that many would perish along the way. One walked its path at great personal risk.

That is the way it is with wilderness journeys. One travels at one's own risk. We remember that risk as we turn this second Sunday of Advent to the traditional story of John the Baptist. More than a wily character we keep on the far outskirts of our holiday celebrations, he is a crucial part of the story. Every one of the Gospels, even the Gospel of John, which tends to downplay the Baptist's significance, introduces the story of Jesus with John and his message. The question is *why*? What does John bring to the story, and what difference does it make as we seek to understand the implications of what God was doing in Christ 2000 years ago and is doing today?

**The story of what God was doing in Christ can only be understood in the context of the experience and faith of the Jewish people.** Why? It is a question we ask as we read each Gospels' rendition of the life and ministry of Jesus, and it is a question we ask particularly when we read the two and only two accounts of Jesus' birth. Some would respond, "Because that is how it happened," and that is okay as long as that interpretation is not accompanied by the insistence that it is the only valid interpretation. Using the stories of miracle in the Bible and particularly the birth stories to define who is "in" and who is "out" has a long and tragic history, often putting the focus upon rigid detail rather than depth of meaning. I recall one person saying that if he had been presented with the question "Do you believe in the virgin birth?" when he went forward as a young child to profess his faith, he would have been at a loss, for he did not know what a virgin was. How do we get at the meaning the birth stories seek to communicate without turning them into tests of faith?

Reading the Gospels as a whole and reading the birth stories in particular in light of the Jewish Scripture and tradition which precede them is helpful. Far from a refutation of the faith tradition into which Jesus was born, they speak of a continuity crucial to understanding Jesus and the very nature of the Christian faith. Far more than "proof texts" lifted from Jewish Scripture, the recounting of Jesus' birth in light of the familiar stories and experiences in Israel's past tells the story of Jesus in familiar terms and concepts. Rather than a cynical attempt to deceive, they speak in terms of the hope and promise of the past, not for the purpose of dismissing the past, but for the purpose of celebrating the integrity with which the God of the past continues to act. "The sacred past blends into the sacred present," Fred Craddock suggests. The writers are not calling us to be lost in the details, but to "savor new stories that are old stories" [Interpretation: Luke, 22-23].

In the case of John the Baptist, the old stories are abundant and they are important. Luke alone shares the story of John's birth, and we cannot and should not read his story without calling to mind the repeated story in Hebrew Scripture of an old, childless couple enabled by God to give birth to a child of hope. It is a story repeated in the experience of each of Israel's patriarchs and matriarchs. None less than Sarah and Abraham, followed by Isaac and Rebekah and Jacob, Leah and Rachel, pass through the crisis of childlessness only to be gifted at long last with sons. The gift of hope symbolized in the birth of a child is repeated in the birth story of the great prophet Samuel to Hannah and Elkanah, whose father, like John's father Zechariah, is also a priest. All of these experiences of hope symbolized in the birth of a child is in the background of John's story, and particularly so the story of Hannah and Elkanah, which is something of a template for Luke's story.

Contrary to those who would depict Jesus as somehow a refutation of God's history with the Jews, we have rather the story of Jesus unfolding within the context of that faith history. "God," Craddock suggests, "is at work within the institutions, rituals, and practices of Judaism" [26]. If we would understand Jesus, we begin there.

**The story of what God was doing in Christ calls us to confront the wilderness places in human**

**history.** God's coming in Christ in the first century and God's coming in Christ in the twenty-first century and God's coming in Christ *always* encounters the realities of the world as it is. We usually miss it in our rush to get on with the story, but we shouldn't, for it's an important note for understanding what Luke is seeking to do in his birth stories. Luke introduces his story of John's birth by interjecting a historical note: "In the days of King Herod of Judea." And again as he introduces the beginning of John's ministry: "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea . . . the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness."

The births of John and Jesus and their separate ministries took place in a historical context, and an ominous context at that. Languishing under foreign rule, the situation of the Jewish people in the first century recalled their experience five centuries earlier when the prophet Isaiah sought to deliver words of hope to his exiled people in Babylon: "A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain." (Isaiah 40:3-4). Perhaps it is the similarity of their situations of suffering that Luke draws on Isaiah's words here, speaking of John now as that "voice in the wilderness." Equally important and perhaps even more important, perhaps it is in recognition that the light and hope of God's peace always comes into the world confronting the wilderness places and experience that always threaten someone somewhere.

God's coming is not just the story of happiness and light. It is the story, too, of the darkness of our world encountered by the light. Advent, you see, this experience of waiting on God, does not turn a blind eye to the darkness into which God came in the first century or comes today. Advent looks the darkness squarely in the eye and proclaims a light that the darkness, trying with all its might, cannot extinguish. Advent takes seriously the wilderness places, the wilderness people, the wilderness experiences of our world and bids us forward still. For sure, the road that must be traveled will not be easy. Its challenges are depicted in the mountains of opposition that must be leveled and the rough and crooked places that threaten to undo us. Advent hope, however, involves trust in a God adequate for the challenge. It is about one who has made a way in the desert before; and it is about one who calls us into the way of peace now.

**The story of commissions us to the work of peace.** Advent and Christmas do make audacious claims upon our lives and upon our priorities. They call us to anticipate that our lives and the world in which we live can and will be different. The coming of God stands in direct confrontation with all that is evil, all that is unjust, all that is violent, all that robs human beings of dignity and freedom. The coming of God does not leave things as they are; and it does not leave us as we are. It beckons us toward a new future and it calls us to responsibility for that future. It is about peace, but not a cheap peace. It is not the peace of a gated community, closed off from all that is wrong in our world. It is not just about peace for me in my one-on-one relationship with God or peace simply for *my* family, *my* city, *my* nation. It is about the strength and the sense of calling to challenge evil, injustice and suffering.

The peace of God in Christ is gift, but it is also task. It issues forth in mission, and it is a mission as wide and inclusive as the love of Christ.

The peace of Christ, you see, is about Syria, Afghanistan, the growing disparity of wealth in our own nation. It is about greed and cynicism and the blame game that turns us into warring camps. It is about the malnourished child who cannot compete in our classrooms because she is hungry. It is about the veteran and the mentally ill who roam our streets. It is about the mother who knows no peace because her child is sick and has no access to health care. It is about young adults and aging adults who feel like they have no future of hope because of the color of their skins. And it is about the hard work we must do to enter the wilderness places dominating human lives for the purpose of transforming them into places of peace and hope. It is about those who act in charity to help their neighbor, and it about Christians who seek with every fiber of their being to be good stewards of their responsibility as citizens. It is about those, who in the words of Bread for the World, lobby our nation's leaders on behalf of the hungry because "God's grace in Jesus Christ moves us to help our neighbors, whether they live in the next house, the next state, or the next continent."

Advent is about the joy of Christ's coming. It is also about the wilderness places that may naturally fall beneath our radar. It is about reordering the priorities of our lives and spending our lives preparing the way for peace and justice and wholeness in the world that God loves. It is about peace; and it is about hoping and working still.