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# *The* Barnabas Letter

*a newsletter from  
The Barnabas Center,  
a nonprofit counseling,  
teaching and training ministry  
in Charlotte, NC*

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**The True Light**  
**that gives light to everyone**

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# A Voice in the Wilderness

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By Roger Edwards

**A**t your Christmas pageant this year, look hard at the members of the cast. Search the names in your program. Someone will be missing. His absence is curious because he is biblically central to the Christmas story and key to understanding the Incarnation. Yet you will not see him in the typical Christmas play.

You will see shepherds dressed in their father's bathrobes, wielding tall wooden crooks. You will see boys wearing the flowing oriental fabrics of the magi. Children will be dressed in the bright white of shining angels and chubby toddlers will be zipped into soft sheep costumes. Perhaps there will be a donkey.

You may even see a child trying to portray the angry frown and insecure crown of King Herod. Even though they are not mentioned in the texts, you might see the stingy innkeeper and his wife. And of course, there will be Joseph standing straight and solemn behind the glowing Mary wearing the inevitable blue robe, holding a bundle of swaddling clothes.

But you will not see John the Baptist. No child will be dressed in a rough camel hair tunic, girded with a leather belt. No one will be biting the head off a locust, while commanding the audience to "Repent!" Although John is center stage in the gospel narratives, he is decidedly off stage in the church Christmas play. Why do we write John out? Perhaps it is because he was just a few months old when Jesus was born. You wouldn't want two babies sharing the spotlight.

But the more likely reason for his omission is that we just don't know what to do with John. He is a wild man, after all, who eats insects and sleeps in the wilderness. He makes bold moral indictments that make him an enemy of kings. John feels more like a relic from the Old Testament than a loving character in the New. If we gave him a place in our Christmas advent, he might scare the children. Or worse - he might disturb the adults.

But if you want to spiritually prepare yourself for the Incarnation – then you must deal with John the Baptist. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John

give us no choice. It is telling that, other than Jesus, John is the only character included by all four gospel writers in their Christmas narratives. In three, John is introduced before Christ. And all identify him as the one who 'prepares the way of the Lord'. The biblical writers chose John the Baptist to announce the Christ. We would do well to heed their wisdom.

But John makes us uncomfortable. Everything about him is rough and jagged. He lived in the crags, dressed coarsely, and ate 'natural fibers'. He grates on our smooth sensitivities. But most jagged of all were his words, which were serrated and sharp. When John speaks of the Incarnation, he doesn't talk about a soft baby laid in swaddling. He shouts, God is coming with 'ax in hand, ready to cut down unfruitful trees and throw them into unquenchable fire'.

At first glance, John doesn't seem to have the Christmas spirit. He seems to be the bearer of more bad news than good. We want John to tone it down a bit. But since he won't, we omit him from our pageant.

But John's sharp tone isn't the real reason for our avoidance. We aren't put off because his message is all judgment, because... it isn't. In fact, if you listen carefully to John's words, you will hear something more than axes, winnowing forks and fire. You will hear the definite theme of grace. Mark tells us that John 'preached a message of repentance for the *forgiveness* of sins.' The Apostle John writes that John came "as a witness to the *light*... that gives *light* to every man..." And the same gospel connects John's teaching with this idea, "from the fullness of His *grace* we have all received one *blessing* after another..." Matthew concludes; "he preached *good news* to the people."

Ironically, we avoid John's message, not because it is one-sided, but precisely because it isn't. He proclaims forgiveness as much as repentance, and grace as much as truth. Along with John's locusts comes honey. We may brand John as one-sided, but we are merely avoiding his true message. We avoid John because he connects two realities that we desperately do not want connected. "I baptize you with

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water,” John says, “but he (Christ) will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.” Christ will wash you clean, John is saying, but not with water. The elements that God uses to purify us are not benign. They are highly combustible; the oxygen of the Holy Spirit, the flame of repentance and the fuel of our lives. John ties our hope of redemption to immersion in holy fire.

John the Baptist therefore plunges us, head to toe, into the critical human dilemma. We want God, for the human soul can truly want nothing else. But God, as He is, is truly dreadful to us - as we are now. In order to receive God, we must be transformed. John tells us that the transformation happens through fire. And there is our dilemma; we want God’s light to warm us, but not burn us. But John offers no such relief, declaring that one way or the other, the approaching Fire will touch our flesh. Either we will be consumed like unfruitful branches or baptized into clean believers.

This tension often proves too much for us. We intuitively long to be clean, but ardently fear the purifying flames. So, like the moth circling the candle, we flutter in erratic lifetime loops around the flame of repentance. Mesmerized by transcendent light, we approach, but only close enough to be singed. Then we flee, escaping the transforming work of dying to self. We desire God, yet we dread Him.

Such contradictory and uncomfortable feelings about God are hard to bear. We rarely talk of it. In fact, we work to avoid the experience entirely, thinking that a Christian shouldn’t have these feelings about God. But the avoidance is a mistake. Not only is desire/dread the natural human response to God, it is the proper response. We will have to learn to bear both these feelings in order to be close to God.

### **He’s not safe, but he’s good**

C.S. Lewis helped us to see this truth. He described it best when He wrote of Aslan, “Of course he’s not safe, but he’s good.” After all, Lewis reminds us, “Aslan isn’t a tame lion.” And so it is with the Lion of Judah; He is no tame lion either. When we encounter God we are encountering The Great and Eternal Spirit who formed us with a word. He is the cause of the making and unmaking of everything. “Of course He isn’t safe” - so our hearts tremble with the awe proper to a created being. “But He is good” - so our hearts long for Him with the hunger proper for an image-bearer. To act differently would be missing the point of who we are in relation to who God is.

This tandem response to a true encounter with God has, by some writers, been termed the ‘mysterium tremendum et fascinans’ - the simultaneous feeling of fear and fascination. When people meet God, they experience both. There are many biblical examples. Upon seeing the Lord, Isaiah cried, “I am undone!” Mary was “greatly troubled” at the words of Gabriel. The shepherds were “terrified”. When Jesus calmed the storm, the disciples, “in fear and amazement asked, “Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!” And the Apostle John fell down “as though dead” at the vision of Christ.

When God comes close, you experience simultaneous fear and fascination. At first, you want to flee the tension for it is strangely painful. But if you stay with it, you begin to realize that the discomfort is paradoxical. The pain is mixed with nostalgia - the trying to remember something repressed. You sense that the ‘something’ is difficult, but also that might heal you. You feel an odd blend of anxiety, hope and homesickness. It is like the sensation of looking intently into your parent’s eyes to see what they think of you. You are uncertain, but you cannot prevent your heart from hoping.

Perhaps we feel what the moth feels about the flame. If you allow yourself to really gaze into the brightness, you fear that you will fall directly into it and be destroyed. But if you look away, you fear that you will never see it again. And that, somehow, would be a worse destruction. For this reason, the experience is unbearably sweet and difficult to sustain. But it is the essential human experience. It is what the soul was made for. Of all the creatures that God has made, the human being was made for nothing less than to enjoy God’s bright greatness and to bear His burning nearness.

You won’t see John the Baptist in your local Christmas play. But you can still hear His voice. It cries in the wilderness, speaking into the recesses of your soul where desire and dread still coexist. God is calling you, telling you that He is coming for you. He is asking you to make ready. Admit your true state. Submit yourself to His bright and burning mercy. Find that His nearness and His greatness, which were sustained in the body of Christ, can also be sustained in you, once you are cleansed by His holy fire.

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## The Barnabas Center

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### Upcoming Opportunities

<i>Date</i>	<i>Event</i>	<i>Facilitator</i>
January 25-26	<b>Barnabas Training Basic</b> - A two day seminar to learn greater confidence and capacity to love others. Includes teaching on a Biblical Model of people and an interactive small group experience. <i>Hosted by Lake Forest Church</i>	<i>Barnabas Staff</i>
February 8-9	<b>Heart to Heart Express</b> —This seminar teaches Biblical principles of marriage along with practical ways to insert them into your relationship. Includes a series of guided confidential personal conversations. <i>Hosted by Christ Covenant Church</i>	<i>Palmer and Roger</i>
Apr 4-6 & May 2-4 Linville Gorge Feb 16, June 21, Aug. 2 - Charlotte	<b>The Quest</b> —Men’s adventure outing incl. backpacking, conversation, study & reflection.	<i>Pete Bondy</i>
February 29-March 1	<b>Honors Training</b> —A weekend seminar for ministry professionals, accountability partners or friends of those recovering from sexual addiction and betrayal.	<i>John Pierce</i>
Tuesday evenings Groups begin January 29	<b>Honor’s Program for Men</b> —A 14-week small group program where men who struggle with sexually addictive behavior can lay a solid foundation for relational recovery.	<i>John Pierce</i>
Thursday evenings Groups begin January 31	<b>Honors Program for Women</b> —For women whose husbands struggle with sexual addiction to grieve losses and make decisions about their own recoveries. 14-weeks.	<i>Annie Schleyer</i>
Thursday evenings Groups begin January 31	<b>Healing Hearts</b> —For women who have experienced childhood abuse. It is a biblically-based, confidential context to wrestle with difficult realities related to their past harm.	<i>Lisa Godman</i>
Monday evenings Groups begin February 25	<b>Barnabas Training Level One</b> —Built on the Biblical Model taught in Barnabas Training Basic, this small group training will focus on application of the model with others, as participants learn to listen and ask questions.	<i>Barnabas Staff</i>
Groups begin in February	<b>Barnabas Training Level Four</b> —For graduates of BT Level 2, this small group assists 4-6 individuals to grow in confidence in the model of caring for others	<i>Barnabas Staff</i>
2nd Wednesday of each month	<b>Honors Couples</b> —For couples who are already working on healing and changing patterns brought about by sexual brokenness.	<i>John Pierce</i>