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GOOD NEWS *Unlimited*

STREAMS IN THE DESERT

By Ron Allen

Buckskin Bill's real name was Sylvan Ambrose. He moved from Oklahoma to the Salmon River Country of Northern Idaho in the Depression, and lived alone there for forty-five years.

He settled at a place known as 'Five Mile Bar' about 275 miles downstream from the river's headwaters. It was pristine wilderness when he arrived, and it remains to this day one of America's most remote, wild and awesome places.

Buckskin lived by his ingenuity and self-reliance. He made everything he needed to live with: cabin, tools, knives, cooking implements, clothes, bedding and footwear. He was a true frontiersman. He also possessed a considerable library. In later years when the Salmon opened up to tourism, folk would call in and he would be glad to talk to them and show them around. Some would come from as far away as Germany and would be surprised when he spoke to them in their own tongue.

When Buckskin died he was buried near his wilderness homestead. He was one of the last in the tradition of American Mountain Men; and authentic wilderness figure.

Men of his ilk always fascinate. That they choose to live far from civilization invests them with a certain mystique. Most of us make only brief forays into the wild. We usually like to keep a reassuring link with the world that supports us. But while in the desert or the mountains, the grandeur and the vastness communicate to us a numinous quality. There is a spiritual dimension to it; a brooding presence. We suspect that individuals choosing to live completely surrounded by such influences with nothing of civilization's genius or stupidity to distract, must surely be penetrated somehow by the mysterious greatness, and therefore be qualified to impart wisdom.

It was perhaps fitting, then, that when the announcement of the Savior's arrival was made, it found voice in a man who lived in the wilderness.

"The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. It is written in Isaiah the prophet: I will send my messenger ahead of you who will prepare your way—a voice of one calling in the desert. Prepare the way for the Lord; make straight paths for him. And so John came, baptizing in



the desert region..." (Mark 1:1-4).

Mark clearly sees import in the fact that John the Baptist was a desert dweller. He describes him attired in Camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, so linking him with the prophet Elijah who also lived in the desert and dressed similarly (2 Kings 1:8). Furthermore, he, John, ate food that desert dwellers were accustomed to eat: subsistence food—wild honey and locust beans. So it comes about that the herald of Christmas—

the announcer of the world's joy, finds his place in the solitary remoteness of the Judean wilderness.

He begins his message with language taken from Isaiah 40:3; Malachi 3:1; Exodus 23:20, and blends them together. Exodus belongs to the time of Israel's flight into the desert to meet with God. Isaiah announces a second Exodus through the wilderness; the preparation of a highway for God that will result in the gathering together of all mankind. Malachi mentions a forerunner; a messenger going before the Lord to arrange for his arrival.

By marshalling these three Scriptures with images of a relationship with God forged in the wilderness, Mark shows that Jesus' forerunner fits the wilderness motif that looms so large in Israel's religious consciousness.

And what is John's message? It is not about himself; it is about one much greater—*"The thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie."* His role is to build a way for one who is his infinite superior. He challenges the people to participate in a new Exodus; to come out into the desert to meet God. And precisely because an encounter with God is proposed, repentance is appropriate (Mark 1:4).

Repentance expresses the idea of 'turning.' In the tradition of Israel it means to 'turn again' or to 'return' to an original relationship. That involves revisiting the foundations of that relationship's history, laid own in the wilderness.

At the Exodus, God rescued the Hebrews from slavery. He took them into the desert and said: "Israel is my son." (Exodus 4:22; Hosea 11:1). He led them to Sinai and told them to consecrate themselves; to wash their bodies, their clothes, and

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EDITORIAL . . .



Pastor Ron Allen

*“Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me”
(Revelation 3:20).*

The attention of a youth is captured by the attractions of a girl. He watches her from afar at first. But then, compelled, he moves to make her acquaintance. She smiles at him and he is emboldened. He ventures to ask her on a date. He buys flowers for her. Wild anticipations course through him—but restraint is called for. Courtship is such nice work; so subtle, so exquisite. But this is how it has to be done; for not only does he intend to claim for himself, he wants to be owned too. He won't be satisfied till she is in love with him.


God is the same. His devotion to humankind is inexpressibly strong. He craves our affection. He is brimful of love. Dammed up within himself are rivers of fond attachment, oceans of compassion and attentive care. Yet he holds steady, treading softly. He will not force himself on anyone. He stands at the door and knocks. Such is the tenderness and delicacy of God.

Once, Jesus taught us to knock, ask, seek and a door would be opened to us. But, here is a picture of God as petitioner,

seeking permission for intimate involvement in the life of his own creature.

That God, through his Son, Jesus, should find it necessary to stand waiting to be appreciated is a devastating indictment of the closed-ness of human hearts to God. We do not like to think of ourselves as hostile to our Maker. We're apt to cite the fact that we do not openly defy him or curse him with bitter invective. No, our antagonism is more refined. We turn up the volume of our other interests so that the sound of his knocking cannot be heard.

The picture of the risen Christ at the door of someone's house, waiting to be invited in, bears the same truth as the story of his birth. When the world was visited by God, he came in a way that bewildered all expectation and dumbfounded every imagination. The King of Kings had no Secret Service to guard him, no standard bearers, no men at arms, no demonstration of might and power. His entrance was one easy to dismiss—a new born infant, crumpled and needy.

The apparent weakness of Christ is a measure of his love. He is not content in his relationship to us unless we desire him to be the resident Lord, who beautifies our home with his presence. 

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keep back from the mountain; not touch it or go near it—all this because the Lord was about to draw near (Exodus 19).

In this way, Israel was taught that the God their redeemer could not be approached in a cavalier way. They were to realize that his patronage did not mean that they had any kind of claim on him. On the contrary, their status as God's people rested entirely on his compassionate action on their behalf.

The people must realize that God did not owe them his sponsorship. In the wilderness, with no means of their own to sustain life, they must learn to entrust themselves to God's free decision to be kind to them. They must submit to a divine judgment which identifies their weak and reliant position; which declares their inability to approach God with notions of entitlement. They need to bow to a judgment that declares the Lord is not someone more or less like those he has saved. He is holy, altogether other than what they are. There is a huge distance between their rudimentary selves and the

magnificence of God's person. “Keep back from the mountain; wash and make yourselves clean” was a judgment that recognized the untamed, unrefined condition of the people. Nevertheless, a judgment delivering acceptance, mercy and adoption into the family of God—“Israel is my son.”

Announcing the imminent appearance of Messiah, John calls for repentance. It is a call to 'return' to the wilderness. They must re-consecrate; place themselves once more under God's disposal. They need to accept God's view of their feral ways. They must confess that God does not owe them anything. They need to accept his verdict against their unruly selves and receive from his hand sonship—not theirs by right—but by his grace.

God is about to intervene in the world—says John—just as he did when he overturned Pharaoh. God is about to act. Men should therefore prepare for the encounter. They ought to repent; turn; turn to God in humility and dependence.

Tragically for us, this is not something we are inclined →

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to do. Rather than submit to God's view of us, we prefer to pass judgment on him. Making God in our image, we have become the arbiters of our existence. The result has not been pretty. The human epic is a twisted and buckled affair; all out of shape. Nothing is ever just right. Ruin, disarray and heartbreak find their way into every enterprise and every plan.

The international community is a neighborhood terrified of itself. We are close to making our earth home 'Planet Hell.' The human psyche is never more conceited than when its religious instincts are in full cry (and we are religious—all of us). In the religious endeavor, man brings his reverential intuitions to the deity and tries to capture him with them for his own ends. By means of devotional exercises, the making of sacrifices, pledges, offerings, penances, liturgies, sacred routines, acts of piety and devout disciplines, the worshiper seeks to put God in his debt; to get control of him.

Not only individuals, but every religious movement, eventually begins to wrest control from God and make him the sponsor of its own agenda. Involuntarily, God gets credit for all the politicking, spin, ambition, calculating moves, hypocrisy and pious humbug that masquerades as godliness.

Contrary to natural preference, and contrary to much religious instruction, repentance is not an occasional physic to be swallowed in rare and exceptional circumstances. It is the Christian's native air, or Christianity dies.

During my College days, there was a student seen by most as genuinely Christian. He seemed destined to be a leader of God's people. Imagine then the distress that occurred when this young man revealed to the college community that he had been diagnosed with cancer. There was widespread dismay and his battle became everyone's concern on campus.

He kept everyone informed with bulletins about his condition until the time arrived when the prognosis was so bleak that the college planned a special gathering to pray for his healing. It was a powerful meeting. There was much weeping and entreaty.



...turn to God in humility and dependence.

revolting aspect. Here was an individual who came to God—not as a penitent. He had reserved his own estimate of himself; refusing to view himself from God's perspective. He sought to make God the servant of his own warped ego. Had he truly consecrated himself to God and come under his judgment, he might have been a blessing to the world. Instead, he became an

Soon thereafter, it became known that this person was not suffering from cancer at all. He had staged his illness, the threat of his demise, and the prayer vigil to boot. The effect was devastating. It cast everyone on campus into a state of spiritual depression. The man's life had appeared to be an example of faith, hope and inspiration. Now it took on a sinister,

agent of cynicism and discouragement.

At Christmas our thoughts turn to Bethlehem; to the shepherds, the Magi and the angels, to Mary's child. Could that which lies so small and swaddled really be so great? The answer to that has already been suggested by John's summons. The wilderness goes against the grain of modern culture, founded as it is on our ability to think, calculate and build. It is a standing rebuff to our multi-layered backup devices and support systems. It is a place that questions our brilliance and desolates our conceit.

Christmas marks another opportunity for us to humbly turn to God; turn from our bloated egos; admit that that we are deeply flawed, that there is much about us which should be acknowledged only with shame; accept God's judgment of our lives by turning to the One whom he has sent, and accepting his word of forgiveness.

Indeed, the Christian way is a way in the desert. But it is a highway. That is to say, there will never be a day on our journey when we will not need to shun our pride and see ourselves through God's eyes—blemished, damaged, but sons and daughters by his grace alone.



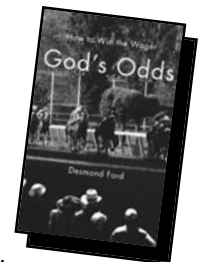
At Christmas our thoughts turn to Bethlehem.



God's Odds

Our daily choices are governed by our personal philosophy. For all action some hypothesis about the origin and nature of the universe and humanity must be adopted, whether consciously or unconsciously. We act according to prior decisions as to what has value and whether there is meaning to life. The question regarding what is good and what should be is answered by our personal decision regarding the beginning of all things. Are we just dirt plus time plus chance, or are we the children of a loving heavenly Father? This book sets forth the odds that the God spoken of in the Christian Bible are overwhelming, and that therefore the Christian faith is the best basis for every life.

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THE TERRIBLE FREEDOM

Frederick Buechner

But if there is a beauty of what is majestic and powerful, there is the beauty also of what is humble and powerless. Like any child, Jesus as a child has one power only and that is the power to love and be loved which is of all powers most powerful because it alone can conquer the human heart; at the same time it is of all powers the most powerless, because it can do nothing except by consent. It is of the very essence of love to leave us free to respond or not to respond because the moment it attempts to force our hand, it is no longer love but coercion, and what it elicits from us is no longer love but obedience.

The greatest single argument against the existence of God is the presence of evil in the world, and to the degree that the Christian faith attempts to answer it, its answer is all tied up in this. The argument is simply stated: If there is a God who is both good and all-powerful, why do terrible things happen in the world? Why does God allow us to murder and wage wars?



Why does he allow us to remain indifferent to each other's needs so that the poor go uncared for and children starve and in a sense all of us go hungry if only for the peace and understanding that the world cannot give? If there is a God why did he not with his great goodness make things right in the first place, or why does he not with his great power intervene in the affairs of the world to make things right at least in the second place, now?

What Christianity seems to say in effect is that God presumably *could* do these things. But as Christianity understands it, God does not want us related to him as pawns to a cosmic kibitzer. He wants us related to him as children are related to their father. He wants us in other words to love him, and if our love is to be spontaneous and real, we must be free also not to love him with all its grim consequences of human suffering. Evil exists in the world not because God is indifferent or powerless or absent but because man is free, and free he must be if he is to love freely, free he must be if he is to be human.

Like any baby, Jesus does not judge or exhort or puzzle the world with his teaching. He makes no demands, threatens no punishment, and offers no rewards. The world is free to take him or leave him...

The great pitfall of Christian art, especially when it tries to portray the birth of Christ, is sentimentalism.... Neither the holiness nor the humanism of the moment is rendered so much as the schmaltz, and the incarnation becomes merely a Christmas card with all the scandal taken out of it, instead of what Paul called a "*stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles,*" instead of the proclamation that the Creator of the ends of the earth came among us in diapers.

-Frederick Buechner: THE FACES OF JESUS, pp. 19-21. 

TO DO GOOD IN THE WORLD

By Frank Crane

If I were omnipotent and wanted to do the very best thing possible for humanity there are several things I certainly would not do. I would not give everybody money, for if each of us had a million dollars we would all be no better off than we are now. I would not give the world a perfect system of government, for good laws work mischief with bad subjects. I would not abolish sickness and the passing of life, for we learn more about the higher values of life from these two than from any other sources. I would not reveal at once all the secrets of science which normally it will require centuries to discover, for the best part of knowledge is the search for it. I would not disclose now all the useful inventions of the next thousand years, for inventions do not come till the race is ready for them.

What I would do is this: I would send into the world a great, wise, sweet, and most manly man and let him stay just long enough for a few to fall in love with him and to get a firm impression of his character. His fame would surely spread through generations; we should love and adore him, and grow gradually like him. Thus, it seems to me, I should do the most good and the least harm.

-Frank Crane: HUMAN CONFESSIONS, pp. 21, 22. 

