

THE BARBARIAN TRIBE

As John's disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: "What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind? If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings' palaces. Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written: 'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." (Matthew 11:7-11)

Although John was confused about Jesus, Jesus was not confused about John. Jesus knew that everyone else was confused about John. John lacked religious pedigree, yet he clearly spoke with spiritual power. At the same time he didn't look anything like a priest or a teacher of the law. To put it bluntly, John was just plain weird. Not what you would expect when you were looking for a spiritual leader. John's faith was raw and untamed. There was nothing civilized about him.

And Jesus seemed to be either mocking or rebuking them for expecting to find someone different. If you were looking for a reed swayed by the wind (someone easily molded by the expectations of the civilized) or a man dressed in fine clothes (someone who lives to impress the political or religious elite), you were looking in the wrong place. But if you went out to see a prophet, John was your man. And he was more than a prophet. He was the one whom God chose to prepare the way for the coming of His Son. Of all the men born of women—and that pretty much covers everybody but Adam—John was the greatest. Jesus, by the way, was born of God. The assumption was that for such a job, God would choose someone with polish and refinement.

Jesus wanted to make clear that the greater the kingdom responsibility, the more a barbarian is required. But then He added something that opened up a floodgate of possibilities for the rest of us. Jesus said, "Yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he" (Matthew 11:11).

That means great opportunities are yet available for the rest of us. Jesus expected that John would be joined by a barbarian tribe to follow. Jesus lived in a time when Judaism had been domesticated, institutionalized, and civilized; it was only a hollow shell of what God intended. John didn't fit into the organized religion of his time because God didn't fit either. Jesus Himself, the Messiah of Israel, remained an outsider even to His death.

Jesus described this barbarian controversy as He pointed out how domesticated they had become:

To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others:

"We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;
we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn."

For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, "He has a demon." The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, "Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and 'sinners.'" (Matthew 11:16-19)

In other words, no matter what a person who is genuinely following God does, you find a reason to disdain him. Jesus concluded, "But wisdom is proved right by her actions."

Jesus was making clear that being a disciple was never intended to be the equivalent of being molded into a stereotype. Jesus and John were considered barbarians, even though they expressed themselves in different ways. But at the core they were the same. They lived and moved in the mystical. That is, they had a unique and transcendent connection to the Creator of the universe. Guided by the voice of God, they cared little how others perceived that. What was invisible to others was clear to them. Their lives could not be explained apart from God.

While He walked among us, Jesus tried to explain this to us. He told us—as if we should understand without difficulty—that He spoke only what He heard the Father saying

and did only what He saw the Father doing. He called His disciples to make this their pattern for living.

Somehow Christianity has become a nonmystical religion. It's about a reasonable faith. If we believe the right things, then we are orthodox. Frankly whether we ever actually connect to God or experience His undeniable presence has become incidental, if not irrelevant. We have become believers rather than experiencers. To know God in the Scriptures always went beyond information to intimacy. We may find ourselves uncomfortable with this reality, but the faith of the Scriptures is a mystical faith. It leads us beyond the material world into an invisible reality. We become connected to the God of eternity. Who you are at the core is spirit. God is Spirit. To walk with God is to journey in the spiritual realm.

MYSTIC WARRIORS

Our spiritual heritage is filled with people like Enoch, who walked with God for three hundred years, and "then he was no more, because God took him away" (Genesis 5:21-24). And Abram, whose spiritual journey began with the voice of God calling him to a life of reckless abandon: "Leave your

country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you" (Genesis 12:1). "So Abram left, as the LORD had told him" (Genesis 12:4). And then there was Samuel, who heard a voice in the night. His story began, "In those days the word of the LORD was rare; there were not many visions . . . Then the LORD called Samuel" (1 Samuel 3:1, 10). Three times he heard the voice in the night. And following Eli the high priest's instruction, Samuel responded, "Speak, for your servant is listening." And, of course, who can forget Elijah, running from the evil Queen Jezebel and hiding in a cave in a mountain? The Lord commanded him to

"go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD, is about to pass by." Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his

cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. Then a voice said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" (1 Kings 19:11-13)

These people, and many others like them, were the barbarian tribe. Their stories began and ended with God. They were mystical warriors called out to advance the cause of the Creator of the universe.

Every one of us who is a follower of Jesus Christ is called to join the same tribe, to live the same way. For the early disciples, Jesus was right there for them to watch and hear. For the rest of us, we have to learn how to see the invisible and hear the inaudible. We are called to join the barbarian tribe and to embrace our call as mystical warriors. Although you can learn important things about God from others, in the end to know the barbarian way you must receive your instructions from God Himself. If this isn't enough to drive you crazy, I don't know what is. Which I guess leads me to the point: there's a level of insanity that comes with the barbarian way.

Thoreau talked about individuals who march to the beat of a different drummer. Barbarians have never met the drummer. In the civilized view of discipleship, everything and

everyone moves toward the center. Discipleship is translated into standardizing everyone into the same pattern. We have equated the promise that we would be conformed into the image of Christ with a belief that all of us will be the same. Discipleship has become the mechanism for uniformity rather than uniqueness.

Yet if we learn anything about God through John, it is that God has no problem with spiritual eccentrics. The point, of course, is not that God makes us mentally or emotionally imbalanced, but that He makes us passionately and spiritually unbalanced. God steers us in the direction of His kingdom, His purpose, His passions. His desire is not to conform us, but to transform us. Not to make us compliant, but to make us creative. His intent is never to domesticate us, but to liberate us.

Is it possible that God is the cause of such abnormality? How many of us would actually expect the person who came to prepare the way for Christ to present himself wearing animal skins, eating locusts, and wandering around in the desert? If he lived today, he would be medicated and diagnosed bipolar. He would be one more certified lunatic. And that's just what would happen if the church were in charge

of his diagnosis. Most of us would think that John was out of his mind.

Confronted by John, we have to stop and ask ourselves: "If this is what the person looked like who prepared the way for Jesus, then what should a disciple of Jesus Christ look like who comes after Jesus? How is it possible that, for many of us, being a good Christian is really nothing more than being a good person?" The entire focus of our faith has been the elimination of sin, which is important but inadequate, rather than the unleashing of a unique, original, extraordinary, wonderfully untamed faith.

You can't escape that John acted like a madman. God drove him out of his mind. The path to which God called him put him out of step with the cultural rhythm. Paul struggled with the same dilemma. He told us that if his only concern were for God, he would be out of his mind. But for our sake, he stayed in his right mind.

UNTAMED FAITH

You cannot meet the Creator of the universe and remain the same. If the God who is all-powerful, all-knowing, and

all-present comes to dwell within your soul, you would expect at least some minor disruption. I think there's a problem when people talk about meeting God or knowing God and yet remain unchanged by God. When the Creator chooses to dwell within His creation, there is transformation. If Jesus has come to dwell within you, you are no longer suited for a normal life.

• To have the Spirit of God dwelling within the heart of someone who chooses a domesticated faith is like having a tiger trapped within a cage. You are not intended to be a spiritual zoo where people can look at God in you from a safe distance. You are a jungle where the Spirit roams wild and free in your life. You are the recipient of the God who cannot be tamed and of a faith that must not be tamed. You are no longer a prisoner of time and space, but a citizen of the kingdom of God—a resident of the barbarian tribe. God is not a sedative that keeps you calm and under control by dulling your senses. He does quite the opposite. He awakens your spirit to be truly alive.

This past year my daughter, Mariah, has been my travel companion on the barbarian way. She absolutely revels in the identity of being a barbarian. She gets it—you are most fully

alive when you are on an adventure with God. Mariah loves to live and lives to love. While I love adventure and seem always drawn to risk, all my life I've been an accident waiting to happen. Mariah inherited my DNA. Put us together, and some kind of medical personnel or a rescue team is usually involved.

Our family was in New Zealand visiting some of our closest friends, the Crawfords. On one of our expeditions we went ATVing in the wild and beautiful terrain of *Lord of the Rings*. Even though she was only eleven at the time, we gave Mariah her own wheels. I have to admit I was pretty nervous watching her drive trails that banked against steep drops and led through moving streams and up and down steep hills. But when we hit the mud track, things got really exciting. Racing full speed ahead while getting caked with mud is as much as a barbarian could possibly hope for. It was the barbarian version of a mud bath right up until she lost control, hit the accelerator instead of the brake, and crashed head-on into her mother's parked ATV. Next stop, emergency room—a vital locale for the barbarian. Everyone was fine.

It was a bit embarrassing since the day before we had an incident while Jet Skiing off the coast of Wellington. I had

taken the Skis out by myself for a few wild and wide-open runs just to make sure everything would be okay. Then I came back and got Mariah. We were having a blast. Wind in our faces, water breaking in every direction, moving freely at breakneck speed. It was exhilarating. It was nothing less than a worship experience. Then we ended up with a dead engine, and we were drifting helplessly into Cook Strait.

Here is what happened. A moment before, we were moving wide open toward the strait, and then all of a sudden I felt Mariah let go. Her arms had been tightly secured around my waist, and the moment she released, I heard her yell, "Stop!"

Knowing she was in danger, I immediately shut down the Jet Ski and turned to secure her. I shouted, "What's wrong?"

Mariah's tone made it clear she thought it was obvious: "I needed to get my hair out of my eyes."

I had flooded the engine for cosmetic reasons. I guess it was about an hour later when the Wellington Rescue Squad came out and saved us. Did I mention that the water was frigid? As you can imagine, while we were drifting, we had a lot of time to talk and reflect. Just a bit irritated, I tried to understand why it was so important to get her hair out of her eyes.

It was so simple—she couldn't see. And isn't that the whole point of choosing to live an adventure—to keep your eyes wide open and to soak in the beauty of the life all around you? Mariah was not about to live through the experience with her eyes closed. Eyes wide open is exactly how God created us to live our lives. And this is exactly what Jesus has come to ensure—that we are awakened to live life wide open as we move full speed ahead.

When you join the barbarian tribe, you begin to live your life with your eyes and your heart wide open. When the Spirit of God envelops your soul, your spirit comes alive, and everything changes for you. You are no longer the same. And to those who cannot see the invisible, to those who refuse to believe it exists, the path you choose, the life you live, may lead them to conclude that you are not simply different but insane. People who are fully alive look out of their minds to those who simply exist.

A SPIRIT TRIBE

When I was twelve years old, I had my first visit to a psychiatrist. I had a lot of brokenness to deal with and a lot of

junk to overcome. And after more than two decades of walking with Christ, I'm happy to say that while Jesus can wonderfully make you healthy, He has no ambition to make you normal. The healthier you become, the freer you are to simply be yourself. The more your identity is rooted in God's value for you, the less you are controlled and limited by what others think of you. If only fools fall in love and people who are in love act like fools, then those who are changed by God's love really do become fools for Christ.

Reading the Scriptures, I find a history of people who were driven out of their minds by the living God. God would continually call them to believe things they could not see, become someone they were not, accomplish feats that were clearly beyond their abilities, and then hold them accountable for it. Certainly that would be maddening. Yet for all who accepted the barbarian call, the same thing happened—they became different aliens.

Peter put it like this: "You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a

people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy" (1 Peter 2:9-10).

He went on to describe us as aliens and strangers in the world; all of us different, but a part of the same tribe; all of us walking in the same direction, but on a unique path; all of us becoming what we could not be without the One who created us. When barbarians travel together, they do not march in single file. There is no forced conformity. They are not required or expected to keep in step. They walk together as free individuals joined not by standardization, but by spirit.

MYSTICAL AND MIRACULOUS

Just a few months after becoming a follower of Jesus Christ, I found myself back at college, but on an entirely new mission. I didn't know a whole lot about Christianity, so I went to everything that looked as if it was associated with the faith. I went to Catholic Mass, to a Baptist church, to a charismatic fellowship, to an interdenominational Bible study, and I worked on a project with the Church of Christ. I pretty

much covered the entire spectrum of the Christian faith. It was like a buffet—all you can eat for \$2.49. You know the kind of college meal I'm talking about—high consumption with low quality. I didn't care how good it was; I just wanted all I could get.

In one of those groups I had come to know a young woman who led worship. I was just learning how to play the guitar so she lent me her guitar throughout the week. One day, to my surprise, Beth came to me and began sharing openly about her life before she met Christ. She explained that she used to live with a guy, and she had just talked to him and decided to go back to him. Her motivations to turn back to her old life were surely more complex than she explained, but all she told me was that she didn't feel God anymore. Her conclusion was that God simply didn't love her. Sometimes it's easier to believe in a love you can touch than a love that is real.

When she told me that a part of her previous life involved drug abuse, it all began to make more sense. God is not a drug, and He certainly does not create experiences and emotions that make us feel better but not become better. I have to tell you I was shocked. She looked like the perfect church girl.

I was still learning that Christians can look great on the outside and be an absolute mess on the inside.

When she unloaded all of that on me, I had no idea what to do. I was pretty new at the whole thing and certainly had not been trained as a counselor. When she told me she didn't believe God loved her, I just knew that was wrong. Looking back, I realize I should have simply pointed her to the Cross. After all, His sacrifice is proof of His love. I just didn't think of it then. I'm always smarter after the crisis and pretty stupid during.

So when Beth accused God of not loving her, I turned to her and assured her that if there was anything God could do to prove His love to her, He would do it. I know better than to say that now, but I didn't know any better then. For some bizarre reason she immediately responded by saying, "Well, then I want it to snow."

Just imagine being in my place in that moment. In a million years it never would have occurred to me that this would be her response. I can't make it snow. I guess I kind of meant God would do whatever He needed to through me or someone else. You know, something "doable." And by the way, as a guy, I think this is why it's so difficult to communicate with

women. A guy would have asked for a convertible or an F “miraculously” changed to an A or a date with a cheerleader—something reasonable.

What she asked for totally confused me. What I said in response confused me even more. All of a sudden I heard a voice saying, “God is going to make it snow for you.” You can imagine my surprise when I realized that voice was mine. I suppose I can appeal to being in shock. As soon as I heard myself say that, I added, “Within twenty-four hours.” I meant to say it would take Him more than twenty-four hours. I got it backward and ended up giving God and myself a time limit.

She left, celebrating that God was going to make it snow for her because He loved her. I left, feeling traumatized because it wasn’t very likely to happen.

I went back to my dorm, pulled down the shades, and shut off the lights, and I got down on my face before God. Have you ever earnestly, desperately cried out to God? I don’t know why I said what I said, but I can tell you, in that moment I was absolutely convinced God spoke to me and in some way spoke through me. I wasn’t trying to be presumptuous; I certainly wasn’t trying to claim I could perform a miracle. It was

like a mental hiccup; the loss of oxygen created a spontaneous response. But it was too late. It was after the fact. All I could do was to beg God to be involved.

Honestly I blame God for the encounter. I was pretty sure He had put me up to it. On that basis I asked Him to please come through. But I'm also a realist. There was a real possibility that it wasn't God, that it was all just me, and that God was up in heaven yelling, "What were you thinking?"

I obviously don't remember everything I prayed that day, but part of it went something like this: "God, I don't know why I said that. I actually thought You said it, but if it wasn't You, could You sort of adopt the idea and take this project on?" I was crying out to God, praying desperately. I was out of my mind, and I fell asleep in the midst of my exhaustion. Several hours went by before my roommate, Mark, came back and awakened me. Just for the record, I think those hours I was asleep count as intercession. It's all about intent.

To my surprise, the first words out of his mouth were, "Have you looked outside?"

The first thing that crossed my mind was that somehow he knew. I was entirely unaware that Beth felt free to tell

anyone she saw that God was going to make it snow for her since He loved her. I didn't tell her to do that. It never occurred to me that she wouldn't keep my insanity a secret. I realize now that I was at a deficit since I had read only the gospel of John. If only I had read the gospel of Mark. In Mark, after Jesus performed a miracle on someone's behalf, He said, "Go and tell no one." Having that knowledge would have been really helpful. I could have reduced the level of potential humiliation and sounded spiritual at the same time.

I wasn't at all sure what was motivating Mark's question. Was he mocking me or trying to warn me that I'd better get to work if this thing was going to turn out well? With little conversation I simply got up and walked over to the window. I remember taking a deep breath just before I pulled open the shades. I don't know what I was expecting to see, but I saw snow everywhere. Evidently it had started snowing almost immediately after I began my soulful conversation with God.

Of course, this is where I'm supposed to tell you I knew the whole time that it would snow, never had any doubts, never worried. But I still don't know how it happened. I'm not trying to explain it, just trying to share this story with you as

I experienced it. I'll never forget the warm feeling I had while running across that snow and finding this young woman playing in the gift that God sent just for her. At least on that day God changed her mind. It was on the same day that God drove me out of mine. Later I would go to seminary and learn that God doesn't speak like this anymore. Essentially I was told that God exchanged the mystical and miraculous for doctrine and ritual. What the Spirit once did, programs have now replaced, and even the Scriptures became proof that God had stopped speaking.

But what was I to do? I had already experienced God in both the mystical and the miraculous. God had already turned me into a barbarian. You could put a suit on me, but underneath there would always be a savage. Once the primal fires have been ignited, fluorescent lights just won't do. I could have rationalized everything I experienced. The problem was that it wasn't an isolated event. Those who brought me to the faith did not take the time to civilize me. They brought me to the barbarian way and never tried to make me like them—only like Christ. They brought me into the presence of the living God and knew that His presence would both consume me and transform me.

CLOUDED THINKING

In the closing verses of Exodus that barbarian journey is described this way:

The cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. Moses could not enter the Tent of Meeting because the cloud had settled upon it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. In all the travels of the Israelites, whenever the cloud lifted from above the tabernacle, they would set out; but if the cloud did not lift, they did not set out—until the day it lifted. So the cloud of the LORD was over the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel during all their travels. (Exodus 40:34–38)

The civilized build shelters and invite God to stay with them; barbarians move with God wherever He chooses to go. The civilized Christian has a routine; the barbarian disciple has a mission. The civilized believer knows the letter of the law; the barbarian disciple lives the spirit of the law. The religiously

civilized love tradition; the barbarian spirit loves challenges. The civilized are satisfied with ritual; barbarians live and thrive in the mystical. For the civilized disciple, religion provides stability and certainty; for the barbarian, a life in God is one of risk and mystery.

And maybe even a little insanity. There's no way to escape that barbarians can appear out of their minds. No reasonable person would ever fully follow God everywhere He calls. God is simply unreasonable.

No matter how we try to spin the story, the Bible is filled with tribes of irrational people. When Noah built the ark, he did not live in a flood zone. When Elijah called fire down from heaven, he had never tried it before. Go ahead. Give it a shot. See if it works for you. I didn't think so. David should have left the giant alone. Hosea never should have married a prostitute. What was Moses thinking when he pointed his staff at the Red Sea—that it would move because he commanded it? And that's just to mention the more popular and highly admired followers of God.

Those people did not live normal lives. Their actions were ludicrous and irrational if you take God out of the formula. Given proper counseling, they would have known better than

to do what they did. The vitality of their life in God moved them beyond the practicality of simply being reasonable. Their lives didn't make sense, their actions defied sensibility, because God drove them out of their senses. Anyone who ever risks listening to God and following His voice knows that to everyone who is deaf to His voice, your actions will seem as if you've gone crazy.

I used to serve on the Board of Intercultural Studies at Biola University, mostly because a friend of mine asked me if I would. But after a while I wondered why I said yes. I almost never went. I hate meetings. I would much rather be outdoors than in a boardroom. Usually I asked, "Do you want me in the morning, afternoon, or evening?" I couldn't get myself to commit to the whole day.

One afternoon I happened to be there when the counseling department enthusiastically presented a plan for serving missionary personnel around the world. They were going to provide access to counseling and mental health to all those working overseas. Even while I was listening, I knew I should remain silent. I kept telling myself to keep my mouth shut: *Don't say anything; don't cause any problems; don't embarrass yourself.* But I just couldn't help myself.