

Advent 2B – December 2020

An old Hebrew legend tells of a disobedient angel atoning for his sin. God told him to go to earth and to bring back the most precious thing he could find as a gift for God. The angel visited earth and returned with a drop of blood from a soldier who had died for his country. God said, "That is precious, but it is not the most precious thing." The angel went again to earth and returned with a drop of perspiration from a nurse who was caring for a sick child. God said, "That is precious, but it is not the most precious thing."

The angel went again, and saw a rancher stalking a man who had stolen his cattle. The rancher followed the thief to his home, and peered through the scope of his rifle to see him move from room to room. He was about to pull the trigger, when the thief picked up a small child. The rancher watched as the thief kissed the child and put him to bed.

Suddenly the rancher was seized with remorse. He realized that he had nearly killed the child's father. With a tear of repentance, he returned home. The angel caught the tear of repentance and brought it to heaven. God said, "You did well. Nothing is more precious than a tear of repentance."

The advent of the kingdom of God is addressed in Mark's Gospel by beginning the story with John the Baptist baptizing in the wilderness. The relationship between Jesus and John the Baptist is a crucial one for the whole gospel story. The fact that Jesus was baptized by John was a source of embarrassment for the early Christian church. This was because such a baptism might imply that Jesus was subordinate to John as one of his disciples. We can sense the embarrassment in the Gospel accounts as reasons are given to explain away why Jesus would accept baptism by John.

The evidence provided by this embarrassment is actually to strongly support the relationship between the two. The early Church would not have invented a story which embarrassed them! But they would need to address an issue which everybody knew about. At some stage, Jesus came to be baptized by John. His coming to John implies his acceptance of John's eschatological

message that the end of an age was upon them. John sought to remove all obstacles to the coming one.

Strangely, Jesus' ministry itself became an obstacle to John himself. While Jesus began in harmony with John and even drew some of his disciples from John's followers, Jesus' message diverged from what John expected.

There was a change in emphasis from John's harsh message of judgment to Jesus' joyful message of healing and provisional experience of the kingdom. John would later query Jesus from prison (Matt 11:2-6) and Jesus promised him blessing if he did not find Jesus' ministry a stumbling block. This insight into John's own challenged expectations shows how close to home a stumbling block or obstacle in belief in Jesus can be. So John's challenge to us is also a challenge to himself. Make straight the way of God through the wilderness!

That wilderness is often the wilderness of our own preconceived expectations and stereotypes. Moving beyond John the Baptist himself, we are challenged to reflect on the obstacles and stumbling blocks which prevent Jesus making a straight path into our hearts today.

Is there an aspect of belief, an experience in the past, or some issue today, which is blocking the way? If so, maybe it is time to work on it. (Comments to Greg Crawford at gc@NELSONBAY.COM.)

A Friend and a Savior

William Saroyan has a delightful story that he tells of the poor, little orphan boy standing amidst a long line of men and women queued up in the front of a movie house. A friend passed and asked: "Why are you standing here? You haven't got the money for the admission charge." "I'm not going to the movies," the boy replied. "Then why are you standing in line?" asked the friend. "I'm standing in line," answered the boy, "because I'm lonely, and I like people." Christ came into this lonely world as a friend as well as a Savior. Why can't you and I enter someone's loneliness this Christmas? (by King Duncan from www.Sermons.com)