

Second Sunday in Advent, Cycle A
Isaiah 11: 1-10
Psalm 72: 1-2, 7-8, 12-13, 17
Romans 15: 4-9
Matthew 3: 1-12
Rev. Charles B. Gordon, C.S.C.
The Garaventa Center
University of Portland

I was once on the staff of an undergraduate men's residence hall at another university. It was rewarding work, but there were some aspects of the job I didn't enjoy. For one thing, the late hours the students kept took some getting used to. But by far the most unpleasant aspect of the job was the administration of discipline.

It was obvious that the hall, like any community, needed to have rules, and that in order to be effective, the rules had to be enforced. That was fine in theory. The disagreeable part was the actual punishment of offenders. The minor infractions weren't so bad. In these cases, the rector, whose name was Bill, customarily imposed small fines on the culprits. As a result, he acquired a nickname: "Ten Dollar Bill."

The genuinely unpleasant moments occurred when justice had to be dispensed after a major incident. Thankfully, these rarely occurred. Even when they did, it wouldn't have been so bad if the culprits had taken their punishment with dignified resignation. I wouldn't have *much* minded righteous anger or haughty disdain. But more often than not, the malefactors were so overcome with anxiety over their fate that they reacted with fear. It was embarrassing. You would think they were facing the inquisition of Torquemada instead of a basically sympathetic person who had been an undergraduate himself not so long before.

The terror set in as soon as the person was caught. It was

disconcerting to watch their self-possession dissolve. If you asked someone to come and see you the next day, he would often beg for an immediate punishment, claiming that he couldn't bear to live for a day with the prospect of the interview hanging over his head.

When the actual interview occurred, the student's major concern was to keep the process within the hall. If the incident was brought to the attention of the university authorities, he might be suspended or expelled. There would at least be an entry made in his record, which, it was feared, might come to the attention of prospective graduate schools, or potential employers.

The student was willing to say or do anything to avoid this eventuality. No punishment within the hall was too onerous, if it prevented the issue from going further. The fellow would hang on every word and gesture, hoping for a sign of mercy. And when he realized that the worst was not going to occur, relief would flood into his features, and he would become a human being again.

It was an appalling experience for everyone concerned, and as often as possible, I pushed it off on to "Ten Dollar Bill." We wished we could make the students realize that we weren't hanging judges. If anything, we were too prone to leniency. But there was no way to get this message across to them. They had to experience it for themselves.

It seems to me that the people who came to see John the Baptist in the desert of Judea were in much the same mood as the students I've just described. They knew they had sinned against the Covenant, and that they would be judged for their actions. They could have stayed in their cities and tried to postpone the day of reckoning. But waiting only made their anxiety worse. If they must be judged, they would rather it be

now than later. So they streamed into the desert to be confronted by the prophet.

If they were to be condemned, it was better to get it over with, but it was just possible that there was an alternative. When they found John, they focused their attention on his every word and gesture, hoping for some sign that even now, it might not be too late to restore their relationship with God. If John called them “a nest of vipers,” if he told them that even now the ax was laid to the root of the tree, they were not inclined to take offence or to despair. On the contrary, these were *hopeful* words, for they indicated that the prophet hadn’t written them off completely. They might still be able to get back into God’s good graces.

They were eager to embrace any alternative to destruction that John would offer them. If he said they needed to be baptized they would throw themselves headlong into the river. If he had told them to eat grasshoppers and wear camel’s hair that would have been fine too. While John’s words were harsh, they, and his baptism, gave hope to his hearers -- a hope that would finally be fulfilled in Christ. They could shed their consuming anxiety, and be human beings again.

Jesus, when he came, would reveal to them that the God they regarded as a wrathful judge, was a loving Father, eager to be given the chance to forgive. But John couldn’t have told them this. They had to experience it for themselves.

St. Paul tells us, “Everything written before our time was written for our instruction, that we might derive hope from the lessons of patience and the words of encouragement in the Scriptures.” This is certainly true of the story of John. The hope he *heralded*, is *ours* in Christ.