

Colossians 2:13-14 from the NRSV

when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross.

Colossians 2:13-14 from the translation called: The Message

If it's an initiation ritual you're after, you've already been through it by submitting to baptism. Going under the water was a burial of your old life; coming up out of it was a resurrection, God raising you from the dead as he did Christ. When you were stuck in your old sin-dead life, you were incapable of responding to God. God brought you alive—right along with Christ! Think of it! All sins forgiven, the slate wiped clean, that old arrest warrant canceled and nailed to Christ's cross.

It was just before Christmas and the judge was in a happy mood. He asked the man standing before him in the courtroom, 'What are you charged with?'

The defendant replied, 'Doing my Christmas shopping too early.'

'That's no crime', said the magistrate. 'Just how early were you doing this shopping?'

The accused man then replied, 'Before the shop opened'.

Christmas is over again! All the preparation, the feasts, the friends, the family, the frenzy: did I give good gifts? Did I get anything I really like or can actually use? How do I tell Aunt Mabel that I hate fruitcake? Many of us breathe a sigh of relief once the holiday is over. And this can be a bit confusing. Christmas may be about Santa Claus, decorations, lights, trees, cards, Scrooge, shopping, stress, presents, tinsel, wreaths, parties – oh and about a baby born over 2000 years ago, right? At least for some of us we can enjoy the nativity stories and the carols we sing about Him.

But the interesting thing about the story of Jesus is how little we know of his life between his birth and his ministry. There is one story in Luke about Him talking with the religious leaders in temple courts as a youngster, but nothing else. In fact 2 of our 4 gospels do not even include the birth stories. The gospels of Mark & John have nothing about the events of His birth.

Sometimes it may seem like all 4 of the gospel writers somehow worked together to create their respective books or scrolls. They were all sitting in a room discussing who would include what. Matthew and Luke telling Mark, "Hey why are you leaving out the birth of Christ?" And John chiming in, "Well I am starting my gospel at creation so leave Mark alone."

Actually, each gospel was created independently by writers who were telling their version of the story of Jesus. I believe that Mark was the first of the four we now have, and Matthew and Luke likely had the gospel of Mark as a reference when they composed their own stories. John's arrangement was the last of the four and seems to be quite different.

The point is that we need to allow each gospel to stand on its own and hear the message that the author was expressing. Now I am not saying we cannot combine verses together from the different stories to get a clearer picture of our Lord. but remember that each gospel writer has his own unique story to tell.

In the early history of the Christian movement, there were many attempts to fill in the gaps between the birth stories of Jesus and the beginning of His ministry. Some of these writings are fantastically creative with miracle stories and very odd incidents, but none were accepted as true and accurate by the early Christian leaders. Why is there silence between Christ's birth and adulthood? What was Jesus doing all those years and is it important?

I submit to you that to the gospel writers it was not relevant to the messages they were composing. Otherwise we would have canonical records of some kind. We read that Jesus was a carpenter or laborer by trade. But other than the one event at the temple and 2 references in Luke that the child Jesus grew in wisdom and in favor with God and man, we don't know the details of His life before the start of His ministry at about 30 years old. In Mark suddenly Jesus comes from Nazareth as an adult to be baptized by John, and then is driven into the wilderness to be tested by the devil. Soon after John the Baptist is arrested, He starts His mission.

Each gospel has its own story to tell. But all four gospels present the mission of our Lord to culminate in the cross; and to triumph in the resurrection. They all start differently, but they all come to the cross.

This babe born in Bethlehem, the one we love and celebrate ... this special gift of God was sent for us. The story of Jesus is the story of the cross. It is that simple. And this cross is where our hope lies. In the sacrificial death of Jesus, we find redemption.

Years after the death of Christ, the apostle Paul writing to the church at Corinth said this:

"When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified"

Two years ago, I attended a weekend event named Men's Encounter. My son-in-law is very involved with this ministry, so I wanted to support him and see what it was all about. We met at an Assembly of God church in Lebanon, Missouri on a Friday afternoon. I was told to bring clothes and personal items to cover two days. There were several hundred other men, young and old who were there. I was feeling a bit lonely and overwhelmed with all the strangers there, but I finally found my son-in-law which did relieve my fears that I might be in the wrong place.

We were told where to leave our gear, divided into groups, and then an introductory service started. There were several large busses in the front church lot, so after the service, I found the one I was assigned to; we all boarded our designated busses, leaving our cars behind; many of us were wondering what was happening? Where were we going? It was dark and I was not even sure of what direction we were heading, but it did seem like we were moving to the middle of nowhere.

I seem to recall some horror movies that started like this.

Well about 30-45 minutes later we wound up at a campsite with dorms and meeting buildings and I have to tell you, I was a bit nervous. My group was herded into building B and the other large group went to building A. Inside, we were fed a supper from Subway. The camp leaders, one of whom was my son-in-law distributed the sandwiches by tossing them to us after announcing the type of meat. It was a bit chaotic but almost fun. So here we are in the middle of nowhere, with no way to leave (hiking out of there was not an option) and no consistent cell signal so I could not easily call Lois to rescue me:

"Help, Lois, come get me. I don't know where I am but come anyway!"

We were a captive audience until Sunday evening.

As it turned out the Men's Encounter was a series of worship and ministry services each with a different theme on Christian subjects such as how to be a good father, husband and how to live a holy life for Christ. And the food was absolutely outstanding!!!

So, we followed the scheduled meetings with breaks for meals and snacks, but it was an intense ministry designed to move each one of us to a decision for Christ.

Another purpose was to bring our lives more in conformity with what they believed to be an exemplary spiritual and biblical model. The services were a bit noisy at times with singing and shouting; however, coming from a Pentecostal background this was not a shock to me – as it might be for some. Still the worship was joyful and spiritually moving.

But one of the most meaningful sessions for me involved a paper we had been given with lists of what they considered sins. It was a VERY long list and included a few things that to me maybe were questionable, but I have enough struggles with my own sins to criticize. We were encouraged to mark those things on the list that would apply to us.

And then we were supposed to write out areas where we felt we needed the Lord's help, whether a sin or not. We had no idea what they were going to do with this list. I was terrified that if I confided some of my many failures and faults that this would wind up in someone else's hands and I would be publicly chastised.

But here is the beautiful part. Once we had completed our papers, being very careful to shield our answers from those sitting by us, an amazing thing happened. Suddenly 2 gigantic wooden crosses were wheeled out on the stage – one on each side - and then they were secured so they stood tall for all of us to see. I recall that they were at least 7 feet tall. This made quite an impression on me.

Then the leader said "Those papers you just completed are for you and God ONLY!! God already knows your failures, your needs, your longings ... and He stands ready to forgive; to help; to lift you up. So, when you are ready, come up front – we have hammers and nails – and take that paper and nail it to one of the crosses. You are leaving all these things in God's hands."

I waited to see what others would do before I made any moves. Slowly the men would walk up to a huge wooden cross with their paper lists in hand.

The keepers would give each person a hammer and a nail to attach their list to the cross. It took a while for this to complete as only 2 or 3 could nail at the same time.

When I finally made my way up front to the right side of the stage with my list, I was very careful to keep it folded so no one could see it. I reluctantly took the hammer and a nail and then fastened my paper to the wooden cross. I was only reluctant because I did not want anyone besides God to see it. When I returned to my seat, I took time to consider and pray over how solemn it is to think that my Lord was nailed to the tree, the cross, just like that paper.

When we were all done with this, we sang a hymn and prayed and were dismissed for a break.

Outside many of us were quiet because of the impact of seeing the cross and realizing it was our sin that drove those nails in His hands.

When the time for the next meeting started, we moved back into the room. But as we entered one by one we were surprised to see that the wooden crosses were now empty!!

No papers; no nails! Nothing on it. What had happened?

The leader then said this is a symbolic act showing the empty cross and the things that we had nailed were gone; never to be held against us. It was the love of God in Jesus Christ that made that incredible sacrifice; an act of grace and redemption meant to bring us into a relationship with God. I wept silently with joy for the forgiveness Jesus has provided.

So, this morning I invite you to come to the cross. No one knows what you need except the Lord. Make that list and take it to the cross. You don't need a giant wooden one, just take it to God in prayer.

All your troubles and burdens are handed to God, who says, "Cast all your cares on Me, because I love you as my own child".

If you have never come to the cross, it is not too late. It is as simple as asking the Lord Jesus to forgive and take you into His arms.

And when again you face failure and pain and feel that you have fallen short of what the Lord expects of you, come back to the cross and lay it all at His feet. How many times will the Lord forgive us? 7 times? No; Jesus said 70 times 7 – which literally means unlimited. Never will He cast you out; never will He forsake you. You can come back to Him again & again & again ...

So, as you end this year and begin another new year, make your list whether on paper, word processor or in your mind. And leave it at the cross. And go forth forgiven, renewed and ready to serve our Lord once again.