

The boy stopped and turned around for a moment to look back. But a bend in the red, dusty road now hid the wide Jordan River from sight. So, he turned back to follow his father and their three mules as they trudged homeward in the late afternoon sunlight.



Caravaggio's John the Baptist

The man and his son had left their home south of the city which was known by some as the City of Palms. Others called the large town a few miles to the north of their farm Jericho. Near the end of each month, the man would pack large wicker frames with the produce of the farm: vegetables and cheese during the summer months, olives, and dates in the winter, and large sacks of fleecy white wool in the Spring. And in the early dark of the next morning, by the light of an oil lamp, the farmer and his son would strap the wicker frames on the backs of the farm's three sturdy little mules. With the first light of the new market-day they started westward toward the Jordan River where they joined the traffic along the river-road heading south toward the Capital. After spending the night with a relative in the city, they would return north and homeward along the same route, the mules now laden with sacks of flour, and salt, and other foodstuffs for their home.

But this would not be exactly the same as any other market day. Because a little over halfway home, along the river-road the boy and his father had come to an unusual scene. A large crowd had gathered just off the road at the bank of the river. And standing in the river was the strangest man the boy had ever seen.

The strange man had flowing brown hair and a beard of the same color which reached to his waist. He wore a weird baggy garment belted at the waist, a kind of robe that seemed to be made of fabric the color of a camel's coat.

And this strange man was taking people one by one who came up to him and plunging them down into the waters of the river, crying out "Repent and rejoice for your sins are forgiven!" And when the man had finished baptizing all those who stood by, he came up out of the river and began to tell the people about someone who was coming, someone who would restore the Kingdom of David, someone who would make peace return to the land, someone who would make everyone love each other and love God."

Late that night, after the boy blew out the flame from the oil lamp near his bed, as he nestled into the darkness of the quiet house, he found that he was still thinking about the words of the strange man. The little boy understood about restoring the Kingdom of David. He knew *that* from his lessons with the other boys of the village, lessons about what the great Prophet Isaiah had said. So the boy knew for certain that one day, the Roman soldiers who even that very morning had been striding arrogantly through the market stalls, the boy knew that one day, God would free his country from these Roman invaders. And the boy supposed that a mighty King who could come and defeat the Romans could also bring peace to the land, and make it so that wars were not fought any more. But, the boy couldn't understand the rest of the strange man's prophecy that he had heard at the river bank that morning.

Because that strange man in the camel-colored robe had said that the mighty king who was coming to free Israel would also make everyone *love each other*, and make them love God too. Now, how was anyone going to do that?

Why, the little boy thought as he lay there in the darkness, even the mightiest king with the most powerful of armies, even the greatest general of all times couldn't make people love each other. I mean, the little boy thought, I certainly don't love Josef Goldstein, not after that horrible trick he played on me after school this week.

And nobody in the whole village loves the Roman soldiers who are garrisoned here. I mean, no matter how powerful and great a king you are, you still can't make people love each other... can you?

Oh sure, the boy thought, I love mom and dad, but that's easy. I've seen how hard mom works to try and make sure we have a clean, safe home. And I've seen Dad come in from the fields some nights when we was so tired he could barely stand up, just so that we would have enough food to last through the winter. I mean, when someone like Mom or Dad does all that for you because they love you, well, it's easy to love them back. But, if they asked me to love the Roman soldiers, why I just couldn't do that. In fact, after the way my x-best friend Jusef behaved this week, I'm not sure I could even love him, not even if Mom or Dad asked me.

I mean, if someone wanted me to love everyone else, and to love God, why that person who asked me to love even my enemies would have to be someone really special. That person would have to be someone who had done something for me so big, so amazing that I just couldn't refuse them, not for anything in the world.

I guess I would have to love that kind of person so much so that I would be willing to do anything He asked me, just because He loved me so much. But, I'm not sure I would feel that way about a mighty king or a great general.

In fact – the boy thought - in fact, I suppose this incredibly special type of person really **couldn't** be a mighty king or a great general. Because this special person would have to be someone who everybody could love – someone who everybody could get close to.



Raphael's *Madonna and Child*

Why, this special person who could make everyone love each other, and make everyone love God, this special person would have to be someone that nobody was afraid of; he would have to be someone who everyone could understand, someone who wasn't afraid to be everywhere, not just in palaces or large, wealthy homes, but someone who would go to the poor people, and the hospitals, and even to the prisons. So, the little boy thought, I suppose He couldn't be the son of a fearful King or an awesome general, but instead someone born to a normal family, in a modest home. Maybe the son of a farmer, or a shopkeeper, or a carpenter.

The little boy scratched his head, and thought a little more about what kind of man this very special person might be who would make everyone love God, and love each other. And, as he finally drifted off into a dream where the sound of faint joyous singing seemed to sift down into the house by twinkling starlight, the little boy smiled and thought, "Yes, that kind of special person, a Lord of Love for everyone, the man who always loved, and never hated, and forgave everyone, and was willing to give up his beautiful life to a horrible death for people like me, that kind of man would be very special indeed. Yes, perhaps if that kind of person loved me so much, and asked me to love everyone, maybe I could do it. Yes, maybe I could.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, Blessed Christmas. Jwb+ 12-21-16