What Does It All Mean?

By Diane M. Houdek

The Christmas season ended last Sunday with the Baptism of the Lord. We celebrate the incarnation with a fitting combination of childlike wonder, nostalgia, feasting, and merriment. But the cycle of the church year and the lectionary readings remind us that our faith is more than a commemoration of the birth of a baby in Bethlehem. That baby, like all babies, grew quickly. The adult Jesus who appears in today's Gospel will begin changing people's expectations and challenging the status quo. If we profess to follow this man, then we better be ready to expect the unexpected.

The most determined new parents soon discover that babies and toddlers can't be programmed and that domestic chaos will become a way of life for many years. The most organized Type-A managers learn that they have to be able to handle the unexpected calmly and graciously if they're going to succeed and help the people around them succeed.

In today's Gospel, we see Jesus through the eyes of John the Baptist. According to John the Evangelist, the Baptist is the main witness to the divinity and mission of Jesus. John the Baptist was a man with a single mission. He's calling people to repent of their sins and prepare the way for the coming Messiah. He's baptizing them as a sign of their being washed clean of sin. He is, as a business or marketing consultant might say, "on message."

Then Jesus appears and he says, "Behold the Lamb of God." And yet twice he reflects wonderingly on the fact that he didn't know Jesus at first. He says, "I did not know him, but the reason why I came baptizing with water was that he might be made known to Israel." His idea of who and what the Messiah would be seems to have been upended by the actual appearance of that Messiah.

Sometimes, even for the most focused among us, it can be hard to know how the things that we do day to day fit into a bigger picture. Like someone working a difficult jigsaw puzzle, we get so caught up in how one or two pieces fit together, or we get frustrated when another piece doesn't seem to fit at all, that we forget to look once more at what we're trying to achieve in the long run.

Our Scriptures remind us we don't always have to be certain of every step and every implication of the things that we do. Life is much less an elaborate battle plan than a quest into the unknown for a cause we believe in with all our hearts and minds. It helps if we can take time out to see the big picture, to reflect on why we're doing what we're doing.

Today we begin once again to explore what discipleship means in our life, how we live our faith in our daily lives. Our faith often needs to grow quickly to meet the unexpected challenges of a secular and sometimes hostile world. And sometimes we might feel blindsided by challenges coming from God's own movements in our lives.

God's spirit speaks to us in many ways—through the Scriptures, through other people, even through the evening news. We need to be flexible enough to bend when our ideas don't fit God's message, but firm enough to hold to that message in the fickle winds of culture. If we're alert to the signs around us, we will know how to respond.

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SUNDAY READINGS

Isaiah 49:3, 5-6
A prophet speaks in glowing terms about the mission of God's special Servant. This Servant will be a light to the nations.

1 Corinthians 1:1-3
Paul expresses his conviction that he was called to be an apostle. He wishes the Church of Corinth grace and peace.

John 1:29-34
John proclaims Jesus to be the Lamb of God. Jesus will take away the sins of the world.
Francis had a special devotion to the infant Jesus. He recognized in the incarnation the extreme humility of God, the willingness of God to partake in every aspect of our human condition. But he also recognized that much of the day-to-day life of the Christian disciple was lived in the workaday world. And his medieval culture was much more gritty and earthy than our sanitized world today.

Part of his wonder at the baby Jesus would have been rooted in the fragility and vulnerability of a baby in a world of high infant mortality rates. For Francis, God’s humility and vulnerability in the person of Jesus challenged him to seek Christ in all of the vulnerable and downtrodden people he met: the poor, lepers, homeless beggars, prisoners and other outcasts.

Francis found Jesus because he looked for him not in the palaces of the wealthy and powerful, not in the cathedrals of politically savvy princes of the church, but in the streets and back alleys of Assisi.

Francis gave us the Christmas creche, but he also reminds us that there’s a time to pack away the decorations and move out into the streets.

“When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among people,
To make music in the heart.”

—Howard Thurman