

Baptism of the Lord – Year A

Once upon a time there was a family with two mischievous young boys who were always getting into trouble. The parents were beside themselves, so as a last resort they asked their parish priest to come over and try and talk some sense into these boys.

The pastor obliged and went to the home. He first met with the eight year old. This priest, who was a huge man with a booming voice looked at the young boy and sternly asked, “Where is God?”

The boy opened his mouth, looking almost surprised and didn’t respond. Father repeated the question, “Where is God?”

Once again the boy swallowed nervously and said nothing. Finally, the priest raised his voice and shook his finger in the boy’s face and yelled, “Where is God?”

Immediately the little boy began to cry and raced to his bedroom where his older brother asked him, “What’s wrong? Why are you crying?”

The little boy, in between his sobs, said, “We are in big trouble now. God is missing and they think we did it!”

“Where is God?” That is a perennial question we all ask at one time or another. Right now, around the world many people are asking that question in the aftermath of the deadly tsunamis in Asia. Months ago, and closer to home, this question was asked by residents of Bridgeville, Carnegie, Etna, and Sharpsburg in the wake of devastating floods that swept away homes, Churches, and businesses. And when we individually face inexplicable adversity in the form of loss and illness we wonder, “Where is God?”

Concomitant with this age-old question there is another one, namely – why? Why do bad things happen to good people? Why do I have to do this?

In the Gospel today, the question lurking in the back of John the Baptist’s mind is not where is God, but rather why? Why does Jesus need to be baptized? In fact, when Jesus approaches John for baptism, John tries to prevent him and says, “I need to be baptized by you, and yet you are coming to me?” Jesus responds with these words, “Allow it now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” In the end, John relents and allows it.

No doubt, John was befuddled by this encounter with Jesus. It presented a mystery that, on the surface, he could not understand. In faithful obedience, however, John surrendered and trusted. What a tremendous act of faith!

Nevertheless, over 2000 years later we all have to wonder. Why? Why did Jesus need to be baptized? The answer to this question can be summarized in one word – solidarity. Jesus, although he was not a sinner, wanted to identify with humanity and sinners in a true sense. And so by stepping into the waters of the Jordan he not only demonstrates solidarity with the human condition but he also exudes the value of humanity. Suffice to say, Jesus became like us in all things but sin.

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The scripture describes this humble identification with humanity best: “Though he was in the form of God he did not deem equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself and took the form of a slave being born in the likeness of man.”

Jesus become one of us – and he knows and understands. Our daily task is to humbly surrender ourselves to him in faith, even when we find ourselves asking, “Where is God?” or “Why?”

“One day, the Rabbi and his students were standing on a hill when they noticed foreign troops invading their town. From their vantage point on the hill they were able to see all the horror and violence of the attack. The rabbi looked up to heaven and cried out, “Oh, if only I were God.” A student asked, “But, Master, if you were God, what would you do differently?” The rabbi answered him, “If I were God, I would do nothing differently. But if I were God, I would understand.”

Obviously, we are not God. And it goes without saying that in our humanness we do not always understand the complexities, injustices, and mysteries of life. All we can do in the meantime is be more like John and surrender to God and embrace what comes our way. That takes a lot of faith, not to mention humility. May God bless us with faith and humility in this New Year. Amen!