Second Sunday, Cycle A

Old St. Pat’s, 2023

I have to believe that the people who invented the church year

 And the ensuing generations

who alternately arranged and revised the liturgical calendar

* especially since all of them lived in the Northern Hemisphere -

 had a sense of humor, since:

 The new year begins someplace at the end of November …

 Christmas runs into January …

 Easter can fall on April Fool’s Day …

 Lent can start as early as February 4th

and as late as March 10th  …

 multiple solemnities can override Sunday

 some of them like the Dedication of John Lateran

 a complete puzzlement to Catholics …

 and the church has the chutzpah to call the current moment

 ordinary on this the second Sunday in ordinary time -

 when there is no first Sunday in Ordinary time …

 so figure that one out.

Equally perplexing and delightful, at least to me,

 is the incredibly porous nature of the liturgical year.

 as seasons bleed through and leak into one another.

 The liturgical year is full of holes.

 The themes of Advent, for example,

 whose opening liturgies conjure end times and last judgement

 erupt even before the first Sunday of Advent rolls around.

 After Pentecost, when one would think

 that ordinary time would kick in

 instead, it goes on hiatus for a few weeks

 while Trinity Sunday and Corpus Christ

 take center stage.

 And even now … when ordinary time has supposedly resumed

 though I don’t know how

one calls this moment in history “ordinary”

 When popes are burying popes

 It takes 15 votes to elect a speaker of the House

 And the January 6th insurrection has just been repeated

 In Brazil!

 Even now central themes of the Christmas season linger:

 With no wise men on the horizon, there is an epiphany;

 There are no angels announcing good news

But doves are in the air;

No camels to be seen

 But a lamb has taken center stage;

And the child named John who leapt in the womb

 when Mary visited her cousin Elizabeth

Has now leapt out of the wilderness

 and is stirring up considerable interest

around a new visitation.

 Maybe it was his unusual diet of locust and honey

 Or his purifying desert experience

 Or maybe it is just because, since his birth,

 he has been specially gifted with God’s Spirit

 Whatever the reason, John’s Christmas gift to us

Is the gift that keeps on giving:

 so absent stars and camels

 minus singing angels and unkempt managers,

John actually recognizes not the cousin but the Christ.

 John does the “behold” thing

 The “ecce” move in Latin

 The “whatup” nod to the Cuz

 Who has now grown into an adult lamb

About to launch his perilous and saving ministry.

We don’t think much about it, this recognition thing

 We do it all the time.

 It’s easy

 We recognize our kids and our cat

 Our coat and our coach

Our choir director and our congressman

No matter how painful the latter may be if you live in Long Island.

Some forms of recognition are easy

 As illustrated by the young father who, in a predigital age,

 lost his wallet.

 It held a few dollars, but more problematic:

 The driver’s license

 The credits cards

 The *I am catholic, in case of an accident call a Priest*

Card … so you know how long ago this happened.

 Dad walked into a police station carrying his 2-year-old boy.

 The sergeant asked if there was anyway

 he could verify his identity.

 The distraught father turned to his son

 pointed to himself, and asked “who’s this”?

 The two-year-old knew the game, laughed and shouted

 “Daddy!”

 The sergeant filled out the official form

 With Dad’s legal name, and the notation:

 identified by relative!

The capacity to recognize seems second nature to us,

But actually it is very complex.

There are, in fact, people

who do not have the ability to recognize

objects, sounds, shapes, smells and even other people.

It’s called agnosia – a neurological phenomenon
 affecting a small percentage of people

 But it is pretty dramatic when someone cannot recognize

 their own car or car keys

 coat or classroom.

 Then there are people who cannot even recognize the faces

 of their parents

 their spouses

 their children.

Less dramatic, yet still perplexing are perception issues such as

 How do you recognize a true friend

 And not just one of those fair-weathered ones?

 How do you recognize a true colleague

 And not just a clever competitor angling for your job?

 How do you recognize an authentic love

 And not just some amorous opportunist?

 True to form, the gospel goes even deeper:

 How do you recognize the Christ?

 Not only the historical Jesus

 The long ascended bodily savior,

 But the enduring presence of Christ among us?

Animals have uncanny abilities to recognize their young

 This is particularly important among some species

 Who breed in huge colonies, like some ocean-going birds

 Who need to abandon their young for food

 And then return into a maze of look-a-like-chicks

 though only one of them belongs to mom.

 Some recognize by shared vocal calls

 Some by scent

 Other animals are cued to distinctive visual markings

 Others by imprinted experiences of touch.

 As Christians we are bombarded by gospel vocalizations

 By an abundance of olfactory cues like incense

 Sometimes overstimulated with worship spectacles

 And, at least at OSP, can hardly escape eucharist

 Without being touched, handled, hugged

 Or at least fist bumped numerous times …

 But what is the litmus test

 How do we sniff out gospel recognition

 Confirm an evangelical sighting

 Or even affirm a graced touch?

 Sometimes, maybe even too often

 our instincts for self-preservation

 or self-righteousness

 disallow us from perceiving real presence.

In the fall of 2022, a young woman with a hearing loss

 attended a critically acclaimed musical on Broadway.

 Increasingly attentive to the needs of people with disabilities

 the theater provided the young woman with a captioning device

 so that she could enjoy all aspects of the product.

 Nonetheless, in the middle of the production

 the star of the show called her out from the stage

 not once, but twice

 accusing her of trying to record the show on her iPhone,

 Rather than fully enjoy it.

 The resulting diminishment and humiliation

 Ricocheted across social media

 And the theater – but not the star –

 Apologized profusely.

 It’s one more example,

less lethal but nonetheless devastating

of the “I thought it was a gun

but I guess it was an iPhone” tragedy

when our inability to recognize

 ends up with lives littered in our wake.

A different kind of recognition story:

 A number of years ago a good friend,

 Flew to Chicago in the dead of winter

to attend an exhibit from the Faberge workshop

 At the Art Institute.

 After his budget airline flight to Midway

He took the train into the loop and enjoyed the exhibit.

 On the return trip to the airport, however,

 He encountered someone panhandling on an L platform;

 Someone looking for help to stay fed and warm

 in the brutal Chicago weather.

 My friend gave him twenty bucks and later reflected

 that he should have given him his coat.

 More touching, however, was the closing comment in his email:

 “the Faberge exhibit was beautiful

 but I did not experience God in the museum.

 On the L platform, however, I sincerely believe

 that I encountered the face of Christ.”

Jan Richardson is a gifted soul

 A splendid painter

 A graced wordsmith

 And someone who has experienced enough

 Loss and diminishment

 Joy and gratitude

 That her vision is clearer than most.

 In her reflection on the dawn of awareness and blessing

 She writes:

I cannot tell you
how the light comes.
What I know
is that it is more ancient
than imagining.
That it travels
across an astounding expanse
to reach us.
That it loves
searching out
what is hidden
what is lost
what is forgotten
or in peril
or in pain.
That it has a fondness
for the body
for finding its way
toward flesh
for tracing the edges
of form
for shining forth
through the eye,
the hand,
the heart.

I cannot tell you
how the light comes,
but that it does.
That it will.
That it works its way
into the deepest dark
that enfolds you,
though it may seem
long ages in coming
or arrive in a shape
you did not foresee.

And so
may we this day
turn ourselves toward it.
May we lift our faces
to let it find us.
May we bend our bodies
to follow the arc it makes.
May we open
and open more
and open still
to the blessed light
that comes.

Such is our prayer in this extraordinary time, that “eyes see and ears hear what God has ready for those who love him,” through Christ our Lord.