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.