
WHERE'S JESUS?

In 1987, an activity began that remains very popular with both children and adults called "Where's Waldo?"

- Waldo is a young man with large black glasses, wearing a red and white striped shirt and red and white striped stocking cap.
- In every scene in the books or games, you have to find Waldo.
 - Sounds easy, but Waldo's creator, Martin Handford, puts so much stuff and so many details into the drawings that it is quite challenging to figure out where's Waldo.

It seems to me that this game of finding Waldo is much like a challenge we face today.

- With all the stuff that is in our world and in our lives, all that there is to look at and do, that it can be difficult to get our eye on JESUS.
 - And as we look at our world and see all that is happening—struggles, fears, hopes, offers, possibilities, options—
 - with all that's going on, we may need to pause today and ask, "Where's JESUS?"

Today's gospel tries to answer that question in two different ways:

- from the perspective of those whom JESUS is sending, and
- from the perspective of those to whom JESUS sends them.
 - And JESUS does this by offering a lesson on hospitality.

Hospitality is one of the most important values of GOD'S people.

Genesis tells how Abraham welcomed GOD and two angels into his camp and provided them food and drink.

- That story stands in contrast to what immediately follows when the two angels go down into the town of Sodom.

Abraham's nephew, Lot, lives in Sodom and, like his uncle, he immediately invites the two strangers to come stay at his house.

- But the people of the city don't like strangers.
 - The demand to humiliate these foreigners so they will never come back.
- Lot protects his guests, not even knowing that they are angels,
 - and the result is that Lot and his family are saved,
 - while the city and its inhabitants are destroyed all over the issue of hospitality.

The Book of Joshua tells how Rahab, the prostitute, welcomed the spies for Israel and protected them.

- Because of her hospitality, Rahab and her family are protected.
 - And Rahab became the ancestor of JESUS.

JESUS, HIMSELF, was born in a stable.

- Though there were no other places to stay, someone granted HIS parents the hospitality of the shelter of at least a stable.

Five times in two verses in this reading today the word "welcome" is used, so it seems to be pretty important, don't you think?

- Receiving someone, welcoming them, and offering them the comfort of your home was the hallmark of hospitality in JESUS' day.

I'm afraid we've lost our sense of hospitality in our world.

- Thirty-five years ago, after discussing hospitality, five families in the church I was serving committed to inviting first-time guests to the congregation for dinner in their home that day.
- It is increasingly difficult to do that now.
 - It's much riskier.
 - Frankly, many of us feel that we're just too busy.
 - And we're uncomfortable when we don't know them, although we do know that they often have come looking for a church home.
 - Yet, if we make the effort, if we take the time to get to know them, it's not long before we could be inviting them over.

In the first church I served, a couple made an effort to get to know a young woman named Kathy, who was new to their neighborhood.

- They learned that she had been in a satanic cult for six years.
- They also learned that she had escaped that cult and now was looking for a church where she could learn more about JESUS.
 - Six months after meeting this couple, Kathy was baptized in our congregation.

In this passage from Matthew, JESUS talks about how hospitality becomes a practice that leads to blessing,

- a practice that leads to finding JESUS.

Part of this has to do with who you welcome.

- Here, JESUS is sending out HIS follower with a message and an example that reveals a mystery about hospitality, whether it is we who are going, or we who are receiving others,
 - and JESUS says that there are three persons welcomed.

We've talked previously that we are the disciples whom JESUS is sending.

- But let's consider those three persons that JESUS is talking about from the perspective of we as the ones who offer hospitality to those who come.

❶ JESUS names the one who is welcomed.

- Obviously that person we receive is simply that person, a messenger, or a seeker.
 - But more than this, that person who comes is also one sent by JESUS.
 - In this gospel, it was the disciples who were sent.
 - JESUS tells us more about whoever it is that answers HIS call to go and who, by going, shares the good news.
 - HE calls them prophet, one called to bring a message from GOD.
 - HE says they are righteous, one who comes to set an example of the life found in JESUS.

And that's why, ❷ the person who receives them receives JESUS.

- It is in receiving those sent by JESUS that we receive HIM.
 - Didn't JESUS say that when you do this for one of the least of these, you do it for ME?
 - Hospitality offered to those whom JESUS sends is hospitality offered to HIM.
 - Service shown to those whom JESUS sends is service to HIM.
- When we welcome one sent by JESUS, whether it is one with a message to proclaim, or one who simply comes by the call of the SPIRIT in the hope of meeting JESUS,
 - we are welcoming JESUS HIMSELF.

And more than welcoming JESUS, ③ the person we receive is not just JESUS, but the ONE who sent JESUS, GOD the FATHER.

- The word “to send” in the Greek is “apostle,”
 - so, the one sent by GOD is the one “apostled” by GOD.
 - And because the FATHER and the SON are ONE, those whom the SON sends are also sent by GOD.
 - To know CHRIST is to know the FATHER.
 - To see CHRIST is to see the FATHER.
 - To welcome CHRIST, or the ones who come in the name of CHRIST, as messengers or as seekers, is the way to welcome the FATHER.
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So, in our world today where we and so many others may be asking, “Where’s JESUS?” we can recognize that

- those who come were sent here by JESUS.
 - And welcoming those who come is the way to welcome JESUS.
 - And this is how we find JESUS.
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JESUS also talks about reward and says that welcoming those who come is not only the way to find JESUS,

- but is also the way to claim our reward.

① We find that reward in the purpose GOD has given us:

- to welcome them, and pray for them, that they might be drawn closer to GOD.
 - Doing so can also mean saving someone, as it did for Kathy in the first church I served.

② We discover the reward of building up the Body of CHRIST.

- Our welcome encourages those who come to grow in their relationship with GOD.

③ We claim the reward of the message that can help us to grow in our faith,

- and invites others to come.

④ We find the reward of the truth about the mystery of GOD,

- that in welcoming others, we welcome CHRIST HIMSELF.

⑤ And most of all, as we welcome others, we gain the reward of finding JESUS.

It can be hard to find JESUS in today’s world, but it’s really not that hard.

- We find JESUS whenever we offer hospitality to another,
 - welcoming them and treating them as we would want to be received.
- JESUS is all around us every single day, in the people we meet wherever we go.
 - Our response to them is our response to JESUS,
 - and the good news is that in that response, we find JESUS.