

Epiphany 01 B 2018
January 7, 2018 :: Mark 1:1-11
Fr. Jim Cook

“The God Who Stands With Us.”

An odd thing about the Church Calendar is the fact that Jesus sure seems to grow up fast. Because here we are, a mere two weeks after we celebrated his birth, and in our gospel reading Jesus is (1) already an adult (2) who is inaugurating a new public ministry by presenting himself to his cousin John the Baptist, to be baptized as a sign of the repentance of sin.

Now, for his part, John the Baptist appeared on the scene back at the beginning of Advent, with a message that (1) the true messiah of God was about to appear, and (2) that some dramatic changes were about to take place, and (3) that people needed to get their lives back in order, and renew their relationship with God. And in all that, John was fulfilling one of his prophetic roles.

Today, in our gospel reading, John is fulfilling another of his prophetic roles: To anyone who believed him and repented, John administered a ritual washing in the Jordan River; a baptism, a sign of a person’s repentance of their sins, and a sign of their decision to return to a renewed relationship with God.

All this, of course, begs the age-old question: Why would Jesus, who's been described as someone who "lived as one of us, *yet without sin*" (BCP 374, emphasis mine), why would he choose to go through a ritual of repentance and cleansing? I mean, what sins would a sinless man need to be cleansed of? And as for his relationship *with* God goes, well, he *was* God. So, what's going on?

There are a lot of ways we could address this question, but perhaps the simplest is to turn to the words of St. Paul, who wrote:

"God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself" (2nd Corinthians 5:19).

In other words, in everything that Jesus says and does, God is at work, (1) on the one hand, trying to show us just how closely he relates to us, and on the other hand, (2) he's at work trying to show us just how intimately he identifies with us. Let me give you some examples:

Because there are times when we feel weak and vulnerable, God shows his understanding

of *that* situation by coming to us as a little child, as a baby born in a stable.

And because there are times when we feel like our actions and decisions have separated us from God, God shows his understanding of *that* situation by coming to us — as we saw in our gospel reading this morning — by coming to us as an adult who has submitted himself to a baptism of repentance and renewal.

And because there are times when we feel that life has dealt us a hand that is sometimes too hard to bear, God shows his understanding of *that* situation by coming to us as an innocent person who was falsely accused, who was tortured unmercifully, and who was executed in a terribly inhumane fashion.

And so, when we ask the question: What *is* Jesus doing at the Jordan river? The simplest answer is: He is reminding us that God *understands* us, that God *identifies* with us, and that God can

relate to the circumstances of our lives in ways that we might never expect. And maybe this is why one of the names given to Jesus is “Emmanuel,” or “God-with-us,” because God *is* with us.

In the end, no, Jesus does *not* need to repent. But he does need to show us — sometimes in dramatic ways, and sometimes in horrible ways — that God has always stood *by* us, and stood *with* us, and stood *for* us; and especially in those times of our greatest need.

Now, I believe one of the surest ways that God shows his solidarity with us, is through the care and concern and support we offer to each other. And a great example of that is in our Prayers of the People, when we audibly offer up the names of people we know who are in need. And God is present in those prayers.

Another great example is through our *Daughters of the King* prayer list. In case you didn’t know it, names can be added to the Daughters’ prayer list by a link on the home page of our website; but Fr. Jeff, Debi, and I often forward names to that list, so you can let one of us know. And those Daughters pray daily;

sometimes for people they do know, but often for people they don't know. And God is present in *those* prayers.

Finally — and we probably don't advertise this nearly enough (or at all!) — every Sunday, we make available the Sacrament of Unction for people who have special or urgent concerns. We'll gather at the altar rail immediately following a worship service, that person is anointed with blessed oil, and specific and intentional prayers are offered. And what's so cool is that, when others see us gathering at the altar rail, they'll just spontaneously join us, often laying hands on the person being prayed for, and offering their own silent prayers. And God is present there.

I'd like to read to you from an e-mail I once received, because these are the words of someone who received the gift of prayer:

[Please give] “my thanks to your congregation for all the prayers sent up for me. With all the faith that is following me around, something is working. I am still holding my own on this medication, and with the wonderful help of all the strangers praying for me, I know *that*

has been doing it. Please let them know how grateful I am.”

In the end, scenes like today’s gospel reading may puzzle us, but, you know, they also represent a truly blessed assurance: that God indeed stands *by* us, and stands *with* us, and stands *for* us — and especially in those times of our greatest need — as we stand by, and with, and for, each other.

Amen.