

“There is one among you whom you do not recognize.”

A number of years ago, there was a story in the *Reader's Digest* – Canadian version – about a large moose that had wandered into a residential area in Calgary, and ended up in the front lawn of a lady named Lorna Cade. A *Fish and Wildlife* officer was dispatched to try to coax the animal back into the wild. After two hours of absolutely no progress, the officer finally shot the moose with a tranquilizer dart. Immediately the moose bolted, ran down a lane, and eventually collapsed on another nearby lawn. The reporters who had been following the event interviewed the lady at the house where the moose had collapsed. They asked her what she thought about the moose which was lying there on her lawn. “I’m surprised,” she answered, “but not as surprised as my husband’s going to be; he’s out of town moose-hunting.”

This is a little like the message of John the Baptist in today’s gospel. The Jews were looking for the Christ; for centuries they had been waiting for the fulfillment of the messianic prophecy of Isaiah. Thinking that John might be the long-awaited Messiah, they sent priests and Levites and Pharisees to him to ask him who he was. John makes it very clear that he is not the Christ. But, he says, “there is one among you whom you do not recognize, the one who is coming.” . . . The long-awaited messiah had already come; the messiah was right there in their midst, but they did not recognize him.

This is actually a theme that runs throughout John’s gospel: Jesus as one whom people did not know, did not recognize, or did not understand. And, I might add, this continues to

be the case right down to our own day: Jesus as one whom people do not know, do not recognize, or do not understand.

The great spiritual writer of our time, Anthony DeMello, tells the story of a young hermit who came to his master and said, “For years I have been seeking God. I have sought him everywhere he is said to be: on mountain peaks, in the vastness of the desert, in the silence of the cloister, and in the dwellings of the poor.” . . . “Have you found Him?” the master asked. “No, I have not. Have you?” . . . How could the master respond? The evening sun was sending shafts of golden light into the room; hundreds of birds were twittering on a nearby banyan tree. In the distance you could hear the sound of highway traffic. A mosquito droned a warning that it was about to strike; and the young monk just sat there and said he could not find God.

The church, of course, claims to know and understand who Jesus is, how he can be recognized, and where he can be found: he is the infant in the manger, the boy lost in the temple, the spiritual teacher, the revolutionary leader, the sacrifice on the cross, the Eucharistic Food, the guarantor of salvation; and these are all true: he is all of these. But each of these understandings represents only one facet of Jesus’ true and full identity. Jesus continues to make himself known in many different ways, and in venues that are surprising, unexpected and, sometimes even unwelcome.

“There is one among you whom you do not recognize; the one who is coming” is already here.

Today, John the Baptist challenges us to think about where we expect to find Christ this Advent and Christmas. This is our task for this third week of Advent.

A friend of mine sent me a link to a song about seeing Jesus. It's a recording by Becky Kelly whose 4-year old nephew, Spencer, was at the mall with his mother a couple years ago just before Christmas. There were many children lined up to see Santa Claus.

Having learned that Christmas was about the coming of Jesus, Spencer asked his mother: "Where's the line to see Jesus?" As she related the story, Spencer's grandfather was inspired to write the song. "Where's the line to see Jesus? Is he here at the store? Christmas time is his birthday, why don't we see him more? He was born for me. Santa Claus brought me presents, but Christ came and died for me." Where *is* the line to see Jesus?

John says we don't have to go looking in far away places, because Jesus is already in our midst – in all the people and in all events of our everyday lives. He is present in the poor and the rich; he is present in the friend and in the stranger; he is present in the co-worker and in the outcast; in what Mother Teresa has called his most "distressing disguise; he is present in the person next to us and in ourselves.

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