

There is a Jesuit high school in a large city on the West coast. It is administered by an iron-fisted principal who possesses the one quality necessary for the job--a mystifying ability to strike fear into the hearts of students. After graduation last year the seniors celebrated with an all-night party at one of the city's most expensive hotels. As a way of shaking four years of oppression, they all signed into their rooms under the name of their principal. As the evening wore on, the party got wilder, and the graduates got hungrier. They called room service to deliver some food. Several minutes later there was a knock at the door. The students were happy to see room service standing there, food in hand. But the room fell silent when they realized the man wearing the hotel uniform was not the usual employee, it was their high school principal. The party concluded with an extraordinary measure of decorum.

When we receive surprise visitors, we're sometimes happy to see them, but often the visitors make us uneasy, especially if they catch us doing something we wish they knew nothing about.

I don't know how John the Baptist felt when he got a surprise visitor at the Jordan. I presume he was happy to see Jesus--they were cousins--but perhaps he felt uneasy. In Matthew's Gospel John wanted Jesus to baptize him, feeling as if he were a five foot basketball player when a six or seven foot player walked by the court. In fact, this feast makes the whole Church feel a little uneasy. We celebrate baptism for the forgiveness of sins, and it doesn't feel right to us that a sinless Jesus begin his public ministry with baptism. We feel like it's the wrong sign, there should have been a better way, a way less embarrassing to him, a way less embarrassing for us. But here he is, plop in the middle of the Jordan River. "Surprise," Jesus says, "thought I'd drop by to say hello."

Jesus still has this habit. You work the same job day in and day out and all of a sudden you meet an ethical question you've never faced before. Or there's a disagreement in your family over the "right thing to do." If it happens too often that Jesus appears where we don't expect him, some people distance themselves from God. They avoid holy places, they won't discuss religious topics. When Jesus comes to them, at work in their Jordan River, He comes an unwelcome guest.

The Baptism of the Lord concludes the Christmas season. It's a feast which announces Jesus has come and God has revealed Him as the Son. But when Jesus is revealed, he may make us happy to see him or he may make us uneasy. He may bring us comfort but he may bring a challenge so to live that we always welcome the arrival of this unexpected guest.