

He's kind of tall and lanky, wears a red and white-striped shirt, bobble hat, and big round black eyeglasses, and has a big smile on his face. His name is Waldo. And the question is: *Where's Waldo?* That is the title of the children's book...that I used to sit and look through with my son when he was a child. If you are not familiar with any of the several Waldo books by a British illustrator...each set of double-page spreads...depicts a scene with very detailed and colorful drawings of many many people...who are doing all kinds of things at some location...and the challenge is to survey that scene and see if you can find where Waldo is in the midst of all that. It takes some time and attention to find him. And when you'd find him—there he would be, smiling, and waving at you. It was entertaining for us to look together and see.

*Where's Waldo?* reminds me of a *very* different book that crossed my path more recently. Jennifer and I were in Iceland in May 2022 for my sabbatical. We had driven to Akureyri in northern Iceland—a city that sits between tall mountains and a deep fjord that opens out toward the Arctic Circle. And there, in a nice bookstore, which had some books in English, I ran across a book called *Where's God?* created by an Icelandic illustrator. Like *Where's Waldo?*, it was a large-format book with illustrations. It too had scenes with double-page spreads, but it was otherwise very different: all the drawings were in black and white, all the scenes depicted many people very sparingly as stick figures, and all the situations were dreadfully...chaotic and violent...wars...disasters...and one called “The Game of Life” which took a bleak view of the journey from birth to death. And unlike *Where's Waldo?*—a book where you *could* find Waldo, over and over again, quite enjoyably—*Where's God?* was a book where you could look and look in each scene...and there was no representation of God anywhere to be found. This was a book most definitely not for children, nor many adults. I was both curious and repelled. I couldn't tell what the intent of the book's creator was. Was *Where's God?* a dark *critique of belief in God...* or a *critique of human beings* who, by our own self-created chaos and violence, effectively obscure our own ability to experience God...and then wonder “Where's God?”...as if it is God's fault? I don't know. But the experience of that book sure made an impression on me.

So, why I am telling you about these two books: *Where's Waldo?* and *Where's God?*? Well, what I had forgotten until Jennifer reminded me this week, is that I discovered *Where's God?* in Iceland on Ascension Day—or perhaps it was the day before. And here we are just a few days *after* Ascension Day which was this past Thursday. And unlike any other Christian holiday, Ascension Day does have a question at its heart quite similar to *Where's Waldo?* and *Where's God?*--and it is the question: *Where's Jesus?*

Of course, there wouldn't have been such a question if Jesus' life and death had been like everybody else's. But, as we know, there was a shocking twist to Jesus' story after his death which completely altered everything people thought they knew about him. In strange story after strange story...many times...over many weeks...Jesus appeared to many disciples...in some mysteriously embodied way. He sat with them...walked with them...asked them questions...and continued to teach them. But there came a time when all that stopped...and Jesus was never again seen in that way. *Where's Jesus?*

The beginning of the answer appears in the story of Jesus' “ascension into heaven”. Two weeks ago, on April 29<sup>th</sup>, Suzanne Nash sent out to the parish a Spiritual Formation Newsletter specifically about Jesus' ascension. It is a good one and I commend it to you. As Suzanne always does, she included numerous examples of art from across the centuries—and in this case it was historic art that imagined Jesus' ascension. Presumably these were inspiring in their day, but I went away feeling like *some biblical things are just best left to the imagination!* All these paintings end up being similar versions of a “flying Jesus” where Jesus--majestically of course—is depicted as hovering in the air...above awed and perplexed disciples...with his arms extended like wings, and ready to fly off to heaven. There was only one painting there that presented a more spiritual image of the Ascension...as something looking more like Jesus passing into another realm...of the light of the glory of God.

Of course, modern scientific people that we are, we know that *heaven* isn't simply “up there”. Even the *universe* isn't simply “up there”, but rather, it is “out there”...in every direction. And...the universe is also here...

because *we are in the very midst of the “out there”*. Similarly—if we were as inquiring about spiritual realities as we are about scientific ones—it is possible to say that...when we talk about *Jesus ascending into heaven*...that “heaven” does not necessarily mean...some other “place”... “up” and “far from here”. Earth...and the whole universe...may very well exist in the very midst of the heavenly realm of God. All that can be *seen*...may exist within the *unseen*.

So, the first answer to the question *Where’s Jesus?* is that he is no longer here like he was experienced by the apostles in his resurrection appearances...but Jesus is now in the larger *unseen* world...with God.

And yet, in another shocking twist to Jesus’ story, even Jesus’ ascension has not meant that Jesus is absent *here*. Jesus said he would not leave us alone, but send us a Comforter...an Advocate...who would lead us further into the truth of which he had spoken...and into a different form of the presence of God. And so, the story of the apostles continued after Jesus’ ascension...with the Day of Pentecost—for us next Sunday—in which Jesus began to be present to many people...in a new way in the Holy Spirit. Well, more about that next Sunday!

But this now, finally, brings me back to those two books: *Where’s Waldo?* and *Where’s God?*.

In *Where’s God?*...God appears completely absent...as page after page of the book depicts people...in the midst of all kinds of chaos and violence...seemingly making an absurdity of life. And it is easy for people to look about and ask “Where’s God?” in a way that the answer becomes: “There sure is no God here.”

In *Where’s Waldo?*...Waldo is always there to be found...but it takes our time and our attention...and it helps to have someone with us to help us look. And then, *there he is...smiling...and waving*.

Holding these two types of books together can be instructive:

- What if, *the absence of God...of Jesus*...is not really so...but that human beings are really good at obscuring our own ability to recognize God...and Jesus...by the chaos, violence, and absurdity...of our own making?
- What if—just as Jesus said—he and God the Father *are still here in the seen world* in the Holy Spirit...to be found *wherever people are*...especially *wherever Jesus’ friends gather*...and where we return again and again to the words of the apostles...and Jesus’ gifts of Baptism and Holy Communion? But also that God may be found, as Jesus said, among the *poor in spirit*...(Matthew 5)...and the *poor* (Luke 6)...the *hungry, thirsty, stranger, homeless, sick, and imprisoned* (Matthew 25)...*children* (Matthew 19, Mark 10, Luke 18)...and our *neighbor* (Matthew 22, Mark 12, Luke 10, John 13)...which even includes our *enemies* (Matthew 5).
- What if, God may be found *wherever creation is truly seen*...*for how it announces the glory of God over and over again everywhere*...despite its own mysterious shadow side that obscures God just like we do.
- What if, God may be found...*once we know how to look...and have people to help us look...and take the time to do so?*

In truth, we don’t have to have these *two books*...*Where’s Waldo?* and *Where’s God?*...to awaken us to this sensibility. We have long had *one book*...the Bible...that is doing the same thing in its own way.

The Bible calls us to recognize...in every generation...what we are doing to ourselves to blind us to God...

And the Bible calls us to recognize that...in every generation...God is still here...and can be found. And that taking the time to understand...and to look...really matters...for the future of ourselves and the world.

And...that really means that...sitting with a child...and looking for Waldo...is closer to the truth of the matter...than we have ever dared to imagine.