

MISSING THE POINT

Have you ever been in a group of people where someone told a joke and everyone laughed except you? “I don’t get it. I missed the point.” Or have you ever been in the middle of a discussion where another person makes a persuasive point and everyone nods their head in agreement—except you? “I don’t get it. I missed the point.”

That’s sometimes how it is with life—sometimes we miss the point of it. Sometimes life doesn’t make any sense. We experience disappointment, or our days seem filled with meaningless activity, or we are faced with crisis after crisis. Sometimes we just can’t figure it out. We miss the point. Like when we miss the point of a joke, we feel as if we have been missing out on the fun of it all. What’s the sense of it all?

The same can happen to faith. We can sometimes feel like there is no joy in being a follower of Jesus because we can’t make sense of what it’s all about. We miss the point of what discipleship is all about. Today’s Gospel story of the transfiguration of Jesus is about a similar experience. Jesus took Peter, James, and John to the top of a mountain, evidently to give them a special revelation of who he really was.

Perhaps it was to confirm the confession that Peter had made for the other disciples just a week earlier. Perhaps it was to prepare them for the events of his suffering and death which lay ahead. Whatever his reason, Peter and his friends completely missed the point of it! Which, by the way, is a theme that runs throughout Mark’s entire Gospel. Jesus would teach or heal or tell parables, but his disciples wouldn’t understand the meaning or purpose of them. I find it strange that Jesus’ messiah ship was not understood by those closest to him.

If we are not steeped in Jewish tradition, we really can’t understand how dramatic that mountaintop experience was for those three men. Moses and Elijah were two of the great heroes of the Jewish faith. It was like having a ring-side seat in heaven. To help you visualize the drama, imagine that your third grade teacher took you to the top of a mountain where he or she was joined by George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. That’s the kind of drama it was for those disciples. But Peter missed the point. “Lord, this is really great stuff! This is quite a show. Let’s build three tents—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.” Jesus was giving them a once in a lifetime revelation, but Peter wanted to make it permanent. He wanted to put up three tents so that he could keep the show going. But he missed the point that this was a special experience that was not intended to be repeated.

We’re not much different 2,000 years later. We want to institutionalize the dramatic so that we can find a spiritual shot in the arm when we need to counteract the boredom of the routine. We build tents out of

tradition so that we can contain Jesus and the heroes of faith, and then sit back and enjoy the show. Some Christians even insist that dramatic experiences are the normative ones and that one's faith is lacking if they don't happen regularly. Jesus didn't respond to Peter's idea. And he doesn't respond to our attempts to build tents either. That's because he knew that even greater things were going to happen that would reveal the magnificence of God's glory. Notice what I said: reveal the magnificence of God's glory.

That's where Moses and Elijah fit into the story. Each of these heroes had an experience of the magnificence of God's glory that became important to the whole community of faith. Moses' experience also took place on a mountain top—on Mount Sinai, where God gave him the Ten Commandments. On that mountain the lightning flashed and the thunder rolled and the whole mountain was covered with the fiery glory of God. And when Moses came down from the mountain, his face glowed brightly because he had been in the direct presence of the glory of God.

Elijah, the prophet, had been discouraged because he thought that he was the only one in Israel still worshiping the true God. And so, God sent him up on a mountain top where God had arranged a contest between Elijah and the prophets of Baal. The prophets of Baal set up their altars and sacrifices and prayed to Baal to come down and burn up their offerings. But nothing happened. At day's end, Elijah set up his altar and even doused it with water. As he prayed, God revealed his glory by sending fire from heaven which burned up the offering, the stone altar, the water, and even the ground on which it stood.

Jesus was setting the stage for the greatest revelation of God's glory—a revelation that was not to human beings, but through a human being. "This is my beloved son..." God had come directly into the midst of life—not through a law given to Moses or through words uttered by a prophet—but through a living human being! This is not a "God from a Distance" like Bette Midler's song goes, but God in the flesh! God among us! God right here!!!

When the disciples tried to contain it, the vision disappeared. And Jesus led them down from the mountain toward the greatest vision of God's glory yet to come: a cross and an empty tomb!! A rugged cross and a rough-hewn grave. There's the true glory of God. But there must be a mistake somewhere. Glory is supposed to be "glorious." Glory is supposed to be "Spectacular." Glory is supposed to be "Magnificent." The cross and the tomb are none of these. Rather, they are the marks of a suffering servant who gave his life as a ransom for humankind.

Let me make a long story short. It wasn't until Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit that Peter and the disciples finally "Got the Point." But when they did, the purpose of their lives took on a new dimension. They started doing the things that Jesus did when he was with them—teaching, healing, and

forgiving. They even did some of the miracles that he had done. But most important, they became witnesses to this glory of God that had been with them in Jesus.

They began telling others about this glorious God whose forgiving love had been made real for them in Jesus Christ who died and then was raised from death. That's the purpose of Mark's Gospel: The followers of Jesus have been given the task of telling others the good news about this glory of God. The purpose of faith is not to have "Spectacular" and "Dramatic" religious experiences for ourselves. The task of faith is to tell others!! And it is the Holy Spirit that moves us to do that. The Spirit is given in baptism and nourished through scripture and the sacraments. The Spirit calls us to reflect God's glory in our lives.

I know what you're thinking: I don't always feel like that. I'm not always loving and forgiving and kind like Jesus. I sometimes have doubts and fears and questions. I have failings and shortcomings and sins. Don't be discouraged!! We have the same answer for failure and guilt and doubt that the disciples had—Jesus Christ, God's answer to it all! Jesus is not only our example; he is also the power that makes us able to follow him!! He is the forgiveness and renewal when we fail to follow!! That's the point of it all that we can never miss. This cross—this empty tomb—has made it possible for "Failing me" to be transfigured once again into one of God's beloved children who are so pleasing to him!!!