

The Rev. Chip Larrimore

February 26, 2006—Last Sunday after the Epiphany

Have you ever been in a group where someone told a joke and everyone else laughed except you? That's sometimes how it is with life -- sometimes we feel like we are missing the point. Sometimes life doesn't make sense. We experience disappointment, or our days seem void of purpose, or we are faced with a crisis. And we find ourselves asking, what am I missing? What's the point of it all?

Well, the same thing 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 feel like we're missing the point of what discipleship really is for. Well, today's Gospel story of the transfiguration of Jesus is about a similar experience.

Jesus took Peter, James, and John up a mountain, evidently to give them a special revelation of who he really was. And whatever Jesus' real reason was for letting them experience that revelation, Peter and his friends seemed to completely miss the point! So I wanted to spend some time today thinking about that revelation and its meaning, and to consider what implications it may have for us as we ponder the "point," the "purpose" of our discipleship.

Now, not being steeped in Jewish tradition ourselves, it is easy for us to underplay just how dramatic that experience was for those three men. Moses and Elijah were two of the greatest figures of the Jewish faith. To help you visualize the drama, imagine your third grade American history teacher taking you to the top of a mountain where he or she is joined by George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. That's the kind of drama this was for those disciples. But Peter seemed to miss the point. "Lord, this is really amazing, so, let's build three tents (he says) -- 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. Peter 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. Nowadays we want to institutionalize the dramatic so that we can find a spiritual shot in the arm when we need it. We want to build tents out of religious experiences so that we can contain Jesus and have "on demand" faith experiences. Drive up to your local neighborhood mega-church and plug in for your weekly shot of dramatized faith. It's so bad that these days some Christians even insist that dramatic experiences should be normative—they should be everyday experiences, and that, in fact, your faith is lacking if you don't have them on a regular basis. But Jesus didn't respond. And he doesn't respond to our attempts to build tents either. Because Jesus knew even greater things were going to happen that would reveal the magnificence of God's glory. And there are greater possibilities in our lives than just getting weekly shots of "faith experience."

I want to make a point here of the language I am using. I am saying, "reveal the magnificence of God's glory." Because that's where Moses and Elijah fit into the story. Moses and Elijah experienced the magnificence of God's glory. And, even more importantly, their experiences became important to the whole community of faith by their sharing of it. God called Moses up to Mount Sinai, where God gave him the Ten Commandments. And Moses sharing that glory with God's people changed them forever. 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 mountaintop where Elijah set up an altar and prayed until God revealed his glory by sending fire from heaven – and Elijah prophesied to the people of Israel and changed the course of his people forever.

Jesus was setting the stage for the greatest revelation of all -- a revelation that was not *to* human beings, but *through* a human being. In the person of Jesus Christ, God had come directly into the midst of life -- not by laws given to a leader or through words uttered by a prophet -- but through a living human being! This is not a "God from a Distance" this is God among us! God right here! When the disciples tried to contain that, the vision disappeared. And Jesus led them back down from the mountain toward the greatest vision of God's glory yet to come: a cross and an empty tomb!

So when, you ask, did the disciples finally get it? Well, let me make a long story short and tell you that it wasn't until Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit that Peter and the disciples finally "got the point." And when they got it, the whole purpose of their lives took on a new dimension. They started doing the things that Jesus did when he was with them -- teaching, healing, forgiving. They even did some of the miracles that he had done. But most importantly, they became witnesses to this glory of God that had been with them in Jesus.

They began telling others about God's forgiving love and how that love had been made real for them in Jesus Christ. That's the purpose of Mark's Gospel: The followers of Jesus have been given the task of telling others the good news about the 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 or show others how our encounter with God in the person of Jesus Christ has changed the course of our lives! And it is the Holy Spirit that moves us to do that. The Spirit calls us to reflect God's glory in our lives and to leave a mark on every person we meet.

A few weeks ago our Bishop visited one of our neighboring sister parishes. As is often the practice during visitations by the bishop, the congregation held baptisms and the Bishop blessed holy water to be used in the baptism and sprinkled on the congregation. As some of our altar guild members will tell you, one tried and true method for keeping holy water fresh from slimy stuff growing in it is to add a little salt or bleach to the water.

Well apparently a new member to the guild was put in charge of preparing the water for the Bishop's visit. And let's just say that her concept of the proper ratio of water to bleach was not what it should have been. Not long after Bishop Swing made his way through the congregation, sprinkling the gathered faithful with holy water, people began to notice little white spots on all of their clothing. One person even wound up with a red dot on her face where this holy concoction was sprinkled. Bishop Swing definitely left his mark on the gathered faithful that day. The holy water debacle was a humorous metaphor for the call to leave a mark on those we meet, but on a more spiritual level, the kind of impression Bishop Swing always leaves with us when he visits our congregation is the kind of impression we are called to leave on others.

Now I know what you're thinking: I don't always feel like that. I'm not always loving and forgiving and kind. I sometimes have doubts and fears and questions. I have failings and shortcomings and sins. Well, don't we all? So don't be discouraged! We have the same answer for failure and guilt and doubt that the disciples had – our faith in Jesus Christ! 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! The cross -- the empty tomb -- have made it possible for "failing me" to be transfigured again and again into one of God's beloved children! And above all, that is the "point" that I need to get. That God loves the person I am and that he calls me to proclaim that love to you, so that you may know it in your life. Amen.