

Getting It

Romans 12:1-8

Crossroads Christian Church

Matthew 16:13-20

August 24, 2014 11th Sunday after Pentecost

Have you ever had a dream where you were back in school, and you were all ready to go take the final exam, maybe in English Lit, you know the subject cold, and then the instructor hands you a test about organic chemistry? Your frame of reference has switched, and suddenly you are lost. Or have you ever seen somebody that you knew fairly well, but in a different place, perhaps at the airport, and for the life of you, you can't remember their name? Your frame of reference is different, and you are stumped and embarrassed.

I've been reading a book by American historian Steven Ambrose. It's called the Wild Blue, and it's about the training, equipping, and sending out of American bomber pilots in World War 2. He tells about the difficulty of learning to fly in formation at night, following the small white wing light of the airplane in front of you. One cadet in training lost track of that light on a dark night, but then he saw it again and he started to follow it. Suddenly, a crewman says, "You're going 400 miles an hour!" The pilot started to respond, "That's impossible. This plane cruises at 150." Suddenly he realized that the white light he was following wasn't on the wingtip of another plane, but was a light on the ground! He was diving! He pulled the nose of the plane up, but not in time to avoid a pancake landing in a cornfield. His frame of reference had changed.ⁱ

It can be pretty confusing to step into a wardrobe and step out into Narnia. We think that we have a hand on reality, and suddenly realize that we didn't get it at all.

Take poor Peter in our Gospel lesson today. He and his friends knew that Jesus was something special, from the time they had dropped their nets by the Sea of Galilee and began to follow him. They had heard him teach. They had seen him heal people from leprosy; from blindness; from chronic bleeding. Peter and the other two of the closest disciples had even seen Jesus raise a young girl from death. Peter was flat-out impressed. Jesus was sent by God, and was setting people free from the bonds of illness, from the bonds of sin, even from the bonds of death. And Simon Peter was a part of this work. There were a lot of things that Peter and the other disciples

didn't understand, but they knew this—Jesus was someone very, very special.

But times were changing. Things that Jesus did, lessons he taught, shook up the status quo. They challenged deeply-loved religious tradition. They were attracting negative attention from the authorities. The land that they lived in was occupied by a foreign power, and everybody had to be careful, very careful, not to upset the apple cart, or even to look like they might be considering it. And Jesus seemed different, too. Preoccupied, maybe. More and more, he seemed to be talking in riddles, trying to tell them things that didn't seem to make sense, that were hard to hear.

For many years, the Jewish people had been looking for a Messiah, God's anointed one. Like King David, he would lead the Jews to victory over their enemies and establish God's reign. A couple of generations ago, the Maccabees had led a rebellion against the Greeks who had ruled the land, and they succeeded, but God's reign hadn't come. The Romans had come in to replace the Greeks. On the fringes of society, groups of bandits out in the hills had wild dreams of being the new Maccabees, of gaining enough strength to take on the mighty Roman Empire.

With all that in mind, we hear that Jesus took his closest followers to the villages around Caesarea Philippi, the foothills of the northern mountains. They could see across the hills of Galilee, where they had been doing ministry, and beyond, to the hills that led up to Jerusalem, the capital. Along the way, he asked, "Who do the people say I am?"

"Some say that you are John the Baptist come back to life. Others say 'Elijah, the prophet who was promised to return before the Messiah comes.' Still others just say 'one of the prophets.' "

But then it was time for a pop quiz. "And you—what are you saying about me? Who am I?"

Peter answered for the group: "You are the Christ, the Messiah." Peter had gotten it. Peter had aced the quiz. Yes, this wonderful man of God was truly the Messiah.

But then Jesus did something they weren't expecting. He warned them to keep it quiet, top secret, hush-hush, not to breathe a word of it to anyone. Why keep it a secret? Why not shout it from the roof tops? The time wasn't ready yet. And everybody had their own ideas of who the Messiah would be. People would come to Jesus with

dangerous expectations. And not even his closest disciples, not even Peter, knew what kind of Messiah Jesus was to be.

How difficult it must have been for Jesus to say, how difficult for the disciples to hear. "It is necessary that the Son of Man suffer, be tried and found guilty by the elders, high priests, and religion scholars, be killed, and after three days rise up alive." There. It was out in the open. They had to understand. But there was that empty, hollow moment when bad news just couldn't be real. It was like hearing the words, "it's malignant." Or "there's been an accident."

Peter grabbed Jesus in protest and rebuked him—like scolding a child. Somebody had to help Jesus come to his senses. Jesus rebuked Peter right back. As the Message puts it, he said "Peter, get out of my way! Satan, get lost! You have no idea how God works."

Peter had aced the quiz, now he was flunking the course. Peter's frame of reference had crumbled. He could not compute how to say "Messiah" and say "must suffer and be crucified" in the same sentence. Wasn't the Messiah to come in glory, to punish God's enemies and drive out the pagans? When Jesus called Peter Satan, maybe he was thinking back to his own temptation in the wilderness, when he was hungry and Satan had challenged him to make bread from the stones around him; when he was unsure of his ministry, and Satan had invited him to use his powers to create a great public spectacle. What Peter had to say was tempting, and that's why it hurt so much. He could call the whole thing off, and save himself. It was a temptation, and his best friend was the tempter.

Jesus called the crowd to join his disciples, and taught them all the painful lesson that they needed to hear. "If you want to follow me, follow me to the cross. You have to overcome your fears, overcome your selfish desires. If you want to save your lives, you'll lose them; if you lose your lives for my sake, you will save them. Is it worthwhile to gain the whole world if you lose your soul in the process? This is the way it has to be. Don't be ashamed, don't turn your back on me, when you see me suffer, when you see me being treated with contempt. That's the price of following God. Are you with me, or not?"

Peter's frame of reference had changed. He had become disoriented. He had gotten it, and then he was told that he didn't get it at all.

Most of us, like Peter, have made the great confession. Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God. We accepted Jesus into our hearts, and we experienced God's love in our lives, a sense of

being saved, of being born anew. Like Peter, we got it. And that's good. That's the faith we need to become a Christian.

But life isn't always simple or easy. Our faith gets challenged, and we're not sure any more. Like Peter we hover between getting it and not getting it. For many, many people, terrible expressions of human hatred, such as the Holocaust or 9-11 challenge any easy, comfortable faith they might have had in God. How could God allow this to happen? How can God allow evil to triumph? Funny, isn't it? That's just like the way that Peter had challenged Jesus. How can God allow you to die on a cross?

But it is only through a theology of the cross that we can survive in a world of genocide and terrorism. It's only in knowing that God can get to the very root of human evil and be with us in our deepest suffering that we can find new life and hope. The cross reminds us that God will go to any length to love and save God's children, and the empty tomb is the sure sign that it was worth it. It's a hard lesson to get.

Like Peter, we get caught between getting it and not getting it. Maybe our whole spiritual lives are spent on that journey from an easy faith to a deeper faith that demands our lives. On this journey, sometimes we get it, and sometimes we don't really get it, but God always gives us the opportunities to grow in faith and understanding. And God offers us a wonderful new life in return. Whether or not we get God, God has us. Amen.

ⁱ Stephen Ambrose, *The Wild Blue*, Simon & Schuster, 2001.