

THOSE WHO ARE LEFT BEHIND

What about those who were left behind? The other nine disciples? What about Andrew and Philip and Bartholomew; Matthew and Thomas and James, the son of Alphaeus; Simon the Zealot and Judas, the son of James; and even Judas Iscariot?

Especially Judas Iscariot.

Luke's Gospel tells us that those were the other nine. The nine whom Jesus didn't invite to join him on the top of the mountain.

But those weren't the only followers of Jesus. We know that a number of women were also in Jesus' entourage.

Perhaps they traveled with him. Maybe they offered him hospitality when he came to their town or their village.

How many people in all followed Jesus from place to place?

We don't know. But Luke did record that when Jesus and his disciples returned from the land of the Gerasenes, "the crowd welcomed him," and that "the crowds pressed in on him." Were all of them followers of Jesus?

Again, we can't really say for sure. But in Mark's Gospel we do read that "Jesus called the crowd with his disciples and said to them, 'If any of you want to be my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.'"

So, Mark sort of implies that there were other people—maybe even many others beyond the original twelve disciples whom Jesus had called—who were at least considering following Jesus.

So, as to the question of how many others might have been followers, we just can't be sure. It probably depended on the day, the week, the location, and the subject Jesus was teaching at that particular time.

And, exactly how many people did Jesus leave behind when he invited Peter and James and John to go with him to the top of the high mountain?

Again, we're not certain, but there were at least nine.

We know what happened up there—sort of. The three fortunate disciple "lottery winners" who were invited to hike up that mountain with Jesus had an epiphany, an experience of the presence of God. But an epiphany, an experience of the Holy, is always a mystery. And an epiphany

is pretty much impossible to describe or explain to someone who wasn't there to witness it.

Peter, James and John saw things and heard things that were atypical—they were beyond the normal range of seeing and hearing. They saw Jesus' appearance gloriously transformed. His face somehow changed and his clothes became a dazzling, "it hurts my eyes to even look at them" white. Jesus' garments shined "as bright as a flash of lightning," is how Luke put it.

And as if that wasn't overwhelming enough, Peter, James and John saw Jesus talking with Moses and Elijah. Moses had been dead for over thirteen hundred years, and Elijah for eight hundred. But that's really not the point. What was important was who Jesus' conversation partners were

Moses had brought the law to the people of Israel from the top of Mount Sinai. And Elijah was the first of the great prophets of Israel. So, together they represented the Law and the Prophets, the two conduits through which God—the holy God whom Israel worshipped—revealed God's self to the Jewish people.

But now, the lawgiver and the first of Israel's great prophets were talking to their teacher and Lord. They were listening to and learning from him.

The point Luke was trying to make was clear. There was a new, greater way by which God would be revealed and made known, through in the person of Jesus, the Christ, the very same guy who had invited Peter, James and John to come with him to the top of the mountain.

After the three disciples saw Jesus' appearance change; and after they saw him talking with Moses and Elijah, they experienced one final, amazing thing. A cloud appeared and covered them, and a voice came from the cloud:

"This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him."

After that, everything returned to normal. Jesus looked like Jesus. Moses and Elijah were nowhere to be found. The cloud had disappeared. There was no voice, only the deep silence that is usually felt on a remote, uninhabited mountaintop.

There was nothing else for Peter, James and John to see or hear, so they headed down from the mountain with Jesus. Now, if something as remarkable and amazing as that had happened to me, I don't think I would have been able to keep my mouth shut. But interestingly, Luke says the disciples "kept this [experience] to themselves and did not tell anyone at that time what they had seen."

Maybe that's because it simply would have been impossible to explain

or describe to anyone else just what they had seen. As I mentioned earlier, epiphanies are exceedingly difficult to depict and or define. I mean, how can one possibly put into words such a holy experience, an encounter with the very presence of Almighty God?

Even though the mountaintop event left Peter, James and John at a loss for words, I still can't help but speculate how deeply it must have affected them. Surely they would remember an experience like that for the rest of their lives. It was just too unforgettable.

In fact, in the second letter of Peter, which is attributed to the disciple who became the rock upon whom Jesus built the Christian church, the author referred to that epiphany experience on the mountaintop. "For he [Jesus] received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, 'This is my son, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased.' We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven while we were with him on the holy mountain."

Peter remembered the transfiguration of Jesus on the mountaintop. And I bet that James and John remembered it, too. But, that raises a question in my mind. Did the experience deepen their faith? Did it answer their problematic questions about Jesus? Did it remove all of their doubt?

Did it make them better disciples, or stronger in their commitment to Christ? Did the memory of that mountaintop experience reassure Peter, James and John about Jesus' identity? Did the transfiguration event make them more courageous in times of difficulty and trial? Did that profound religious experience make those three disciple-witnesses more profoundly religious people?

It would seem not.

Luke's Gospel records that very shortly after coming down from the mountain, the twelve disciples got into an argument about which of them was the greatest. Peter, James and John were surely involved in that squabble. They may well have even played the "I was on the mountaintop with Jesus" trump card against the others, believing that because they were invited to the mountaintop, they deserved special privileges.

Talk about missing the whole point of that glorious experience.

It would seem, then, that having a very powerful religious epiphany, an unforgettable, once-in-a-lifetime revelatory event like Peter, James and John had on that mountaintop, doesn't necessarily produce perfect faith.

I don't have to tell you, of course (but I will anyway), that not everyone is privileged to have a powerful epiphany experience. Such sacred experiences are rare. They don't happen every day; they don't happen to just anyone; and when they do happen it's always in God's good time, and at

God's total discretion.

Epiphanies can't be manufactured by us, and we can't force God to manufacture one for us. So if you've never experienced a powerful and glorious experience of God's presence in your life, you have a lot of company.

Company that includes, by the way, the nine or the nineteen or the ninety or the nine hundred who were left behind in the valley, waiting and wondering what was happening up on the mountain and why they weren't invited.

So, let's fast forward to the present day. I have a few questions for us to ponder. What happens to the faith those of us who have never had the privilege of seeing a gloriously transfigured Jesus standing before us?

Will we who have been left behind in the valley of our ordinary, routine lives find enough reason to believe in the Christ who was gloriously transfigured on the mountaintop in our absence?

Will you or I ever have an experience of God's presence that will fill us with the kind of wonder and awe that Peter, James and John were filled with when they saw Jesus shine like the sun? And what if we never do?

I would ask, if you and I are never blessed in our lifetimes to have an epiphany experience like Peter, James and John experienced, what then will be the foundation, the cornerstone upon which we will build our faith?

If we have no epiphany experience to refer back to and strengthen us, then how will we be able to deal with times of doubt and survive the difficult and painful experiences of life that, at least on the surface, seem to contradict the reality of God's presence, cast doubt on God's very existence, and dispute the truth of God's merciful and omnipotent rule?

Is it possible for those of us who were left behind down in the valley and didn't experience an epiphany to still have faith and be faithful to Christ?

There have been saints and mystics and even ordinary people who suddenly found themselves in God's glorious presence. But the truth is that most of us, for whatever reason, will never be invited to go up on the mountaintop with Jesus. Most of us end up staying behind, camped at the bottom, drinking our coffee, watching TV, going to work, washing the dishes and going to our kids' or grandkids' sporting events, with no transfigured Jesus anywhere to be seen.

Who could blame us, really, if we sometimes asked ourselves, "I wonder what's going on up there on top of the mountain? Why wasn't I allowed to go?"

What will happen to the nine or nineteen or ninety, or the nine

hundred million or more Christians on the earth today—Christians like us—who get left behind, down in the valley? Will they—will we—continue to have faith? If we're not given the privilege of an epiphany that allows us to sense the presence of God in some amazing vision or a dazzlingly white, heavenly light, will we be able to sense God's presence somehow, somewhere, in the routine ordinariness of our lives?

Will we perhaps sense God's presence in the shining face of a friend, or the unexpectedly bright kindness of a stranger? Will we sense God's presence in the person glowing with kindness who cares about us, visits us, supports us or forgives us?

Will we get a taste of God's passion for goodness and righteousness in and organization like the Boy Scouts, that shapes young men's lives for the better? Or in the activists who courageously stand up against racism, sexism and homophobia; who are advocates for the poor and the homeless, or who work to help kids who go to school hungry and people who are struggling with addiction to drugs and alcohol?

And will we see Christ himself draw near to us when, in just a few minutes, we hold out our hands to receive the bread and cup of Holy Communion?

My friends, not everyone gets to go to the top of the mountain with Jesus. A lot of us would like to, but few of us ever will. Most of us, whether we like it or not, and whether we ask to or not, will end up being left behind down below.

But remember this.

When Jesus and Peter and James and John made it back down to the foot of the mountain and set off for their next destination, the other nine went, too. They also followed Jesus, without having been on the mountain with him.

Because there's more than one reason to be a disciple of Christ.

And there's more than one way to experience God's presence.

And there's more than one reason to believe in Jesus as Savior and Lord.

And there's more than one way to have faith one's strengthened and live out that faith.

We may not ever get to go to some mountaintop with Christ and witness his glory there; but when Christ eventually comes down from the mountain and moves on to his next destination to continue his ministry in this world down here, those of us who were left behind will still have opportunities to believe in him and follow him.

May Jesus give us whatever inspiration and evidence, whatever epiphanies we need, to be able to do that. Amen.