

What happens in between?

By [Steve Pankey](#)

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Sometimes preaching in a lectionary church is like being Philip in Acts 8—the Spirit plucks us up and drops us where ever she darn well pleases. It is necessarily this way, certainly. Between the thematic requirements of the seasons of the church year and the sheer length of the four Gospels spread out over 156 Sundays, there is no way we can read all four in their entirety in three years. So, we skip stuff. Especially in Year B, as we try to mash the shortest Gospel, Mark, together with the other Gospel, John, together in some supposedly coherent way.

Which brings me to this week. Last Sunday, Proper 19B, we heard the story of Jesus and his disciples at Caesarea Philippi. Jesus asked his disciples, “who do the people say that I am?” Then, he asked the more pointed question, “who do you say that I am?” Peter announces Jesus’ messiahship and immediately screws the pooch, to which Jesus replies, “If any wants to become my followers, let them deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me.” Our lection ended at Mark 8:38.

This Sunday, Proper 20B, we skip ahead and begin our pericope at Mark 9:30. Jesus and his disciples are travelling through Galilee as Jesus foretells his death and resurrection a second time. The disciples, however, aren’t listening, and instead are fighting over who is the best. Jesus, having properly scolded them for their tomfoolery, instructs them to take on a posture of servanthood and hospitality, if indeed they wish to be the greatest.

The thing is, if our congregations are paying attention, they’ll think that this all happens in one tidy story. The truth of the matter, however, is that we’ve skipped two big stories in Mark’s Gospel. The first story we jump past is done for Church Calendar reasons, we’ll hear the Transfiguration another time. The second story, I’m not sure why we don’t hear it, other than failure isn’t the stuff of inspiration. As Jesus and the three return from the mountain, the rest of his disciples tell Jesus about the boy with the spirit whom they could not heal. Do you know why they couldn’t heal him? Jesus says, “You should have prayed. Prayer works.” What a

sermon that would be.

Anyway, it is in the context of the disciples' failure that we hear the lesson about their arguing about who is the greatest. Three of them got to go up the mountain while the other nine forgot to pray when they tried to perform a miracle. All 12 of them continue to miss the point as Jesus once again has to stop and teach them an object lesson.

"Welcome the least and you welcome me," Jesus says. I feel like some context helps us understand that maybe the 12 who fought over the title of greatest needed to hear these words especially in that moment.

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