

People don't get Scripture, and they don't get God.

I'll start with Scripture.

Many people treat Scripture dogmatically – by that I mean that they treat it as inflexible – as though it contains arcane religious creed, something that worked a long, long time ago, but no longer suits.

Other people treat Scripture literally, as though God actually uttered each black word on white page.

Still a third group of people treats Scripture apologetically. These people experience God, so they try to defend God and Scripture to others.

The mistake common to all three approaches is this: all three groups of people treat Scripture as though the words themselves are the holy part of Scripture, and not the relationship that Scripture creates between a person and God.

But Scripture is about far more than ink on paper. It is about your understanding of the very Person of God. Scripture is about God's intoxicating involvement in your life. Only God is not easily found, hiding between letters and words, paragraphs and pages.

Do you remember in Harry Potter, how the kids caught the train to Hogwarts? At the railway station, they would face a brick column, and run at it. Instead of colliding into the column with arms and legs splaying sideways, the kids would pass miraculously through it. The column was a passageway all along, only you couldn't see it.

Scripture is like that. God is there all along, only you can't see God with your human eye. Rather, God as Spirit emerges, as if forming the invisible passageway. You run at the brick column of Scripture applying your Harry Potter faith and confidence that the column will open into God.

The collect this morning captures my point. You take Scripture - read it, you learn, mark and inwardly digest Scripture, and God emerges from page in the vapor form of hope like genie from bottle, surprising, yet tangibly real and extraordinary.

Rabbi Levinas hints at this dynamism of Scripture – the way it melds into your life, affects you, heals and directs you – when he instructs, “you must rub the page until it bleeds.”

In one place, the writer of the New Testament Letter to the Hebrews writes similarly: Scripture is living and active; it is sharper than any two edged sword, capable of dividing your bone from its marrow.

Yet, so many people treat the Bible as two-dimensional. God likewise becomes two-dimensional, flat, a cardboard cutout, a cartoon caricature. An old man with a gray beard, or some ephemeral spirit without personhood.

That is exactly how the servant who buried the talent in the ground viewed his Master, as two-dimensional.

These days, putting money in the ground might be a very smart investment. Had this fellow buried the talent in the ground at the beginning of 2008 and took it out again at the end of 2009, people would have applauded him as a genius.

But in Jesus' world, it wasn't the return, or lack of it, that counted.

It was the attitude. The servant's perception that counted.

You think this parable is about results, but it isn't. Rub the page until it bleeds. Look more closely, and you will see that the parable is about joy. It is about joy, and God's eternal desire to share happiness and joy with you. The Master simply can't wait to welcome his servants into his joy.

Enter into the joy- happiness – of your Master, he tells the first two servants. Why? They saw their master as well – joyful.

This poor third servant never saw his Master as joyful. Instead, he saw the Master as harsh. A taskmaster, who took what was not his, reaped where he did not sow.

Because the others saw the Master – God – as generous, God was free to be generous.

But because the sad servant saw the Master – God – as harsh, God could be only harsh.

Which is it – is God full of joyful desire for you, or harsh punishment? The answer isn't found within God; the answer is found within you.

The Catholic writer Andrew Greeley tells the story of a teenager who exhibited great talent as a writer. She wove words creatively into her imagination and stories. Her teachers encouraged her; she had promise, she could become a great novelist.

She didn't believe them. I'm no different from anyone else. Writers are different; I'm not.

Her family agreed with her. They discouraged her, What do you know about life? They scoffed.

Some of the men she dated into her early twenties thought she was a genius, but others laughed at the notion. Deep down, she knew she was talented, but deep down, she was deeply afraid.

Finally, she laughed bitterly at herself and married one of the deprecators. And she remained terribly unfulfilled, eventually abandoned her family, and became an alcoholic.

Maybe I should have been a writer, she wistfully conceded.

She, like the man who buried the talent, was afraid.

Deeply afraid.

So much about life has to do with the geographic location you choose for your heart's home. In the city of hope and possibility, or in the wasteland of fear and despair.

The reason the collect calls for us to immerse ourselves in Scripture – not so you will learn the correct creed, or discover God's literal black and white word, but so you will have hope.

You read, learn, mark and inwardly digest Scripture so you can live in hope. A real, tangible, God is on my side - hope.

The thing about Occupy Wall Street or Oakland or even Marin is not the disparity between the haves and the have-nots. In fact, the disparity has been growing for decades, and is no surprise to those paying attention.

Rather, the thing about the Occupy movement is the dearth of hope. Now that the economy is dubious, at best, and so many people find themselves in a downward spiral economically and professionally, hope for them seems to have vaporized.

Many people see only a future without hope.

Before, in our country, most people did not mind it when others got richer – or more famous or more successful – because the promise was that they, too, would improve, with a little hard work, a little spit and grit.

Now, where is that hope? The impetus to the movement is a valid societal fear to which our leaders - business and political – are not paying attention.

A valid fear, worthy of expression.

But our Christian hope has not disappeared. Our Christian hope has not evaporated.

It was never founded upon our economic or societal success, but upon Christ, and Christ alone. The belief that we serve a God who is Good, an extravagant God of infinite grace as oxygen breathed regularly into your lungs and soul.

In the words of the old hymn, “Our Hope is built on nothing less, than Jesus’ blood and righteousness.”

On the firm belief that God is good, always good, always ready to share the joy and happiness with you.