

In plain sight

That's where you'll find the Bible's truth

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The heart of the biblical message is plainly obvious, not least because the 'mighty acts of God' took place in full public view.

It's easy to get distracted with the Scriptures. Whenever I hear the story of Jesus healing the possessed Gerasene by sending the unclean spirits into the herd of swine (Mark 5:1-20), I get distracted. Pigs? Why are they here? I thought they were taboo. And I like bacon—what's wrong with that?

Even if my straying line of thought doesn't distract you, you know how easy it is, especially among friends in a Bible study. Perhaps a detail in a story catches your eye—why a *denarius*? A good Bible dictionary can give you a definition and some historical background.

These examples may seem harmless, but two serious problems lurk in the shadows. One is the idea that the Scriptures are irreducibly opaque, a collection of mysteries, riddles and puzzles that defy comprehension and require the expertise of specialists to unlock the hidden secrets of divine truth. Where this idea takes hold, reading the Bible begins to look like a technical climb up a forbidding mountain, closed to all but an elite cadre of professionals and expert amateurs.

The second problem developed in reaction to this exclusion. It's the idea that a "commonsense reading" of any Scripture can yield practical guidance for life and that the Bible as a whole contains answers for every question. This reaction is understandable, but the result is that reading the Scriptures begins to look like trying to penetrate a dense thicket of complexly interlocking branches of information with no discernible landmarks pointing to a destination.

For faithful Christians and for uncertain seekers alike, these approaches become distractions.

There is another way of approaching the Scriptures. Martin Luther and others like him called it paying attention to the "plain sense" or meaning of the Bible. Their point was not to deny that some information in the Bible is obscure or complicated. Rather, they rightly pointed out that the heart of the biblical message is plainly obvious, not least because the "mighty

acts of God" took place in full public view.

Israel's liberation from slavery, Jesus' crucifixion on the cross—these are not hidden secrets or minor cul-de-sacs in the biblical narrative.

Let's see how this approach can work in practice, using this month's Gospel readings. The first part of Mark 6 provides ample opportunities for distraction. Jesus had brothers *and* sisters (Mark 6:3)? Are modern movie depictions of the dance by Herodias' daughter too exotic (Mark 6:22)? Regardless, doesn't it prove the corrupting influence of popular entertainment?

Don't be distracted. These stories are here to help you see what was happening in plain sight. King Herod saw John as a threat and, despite his reservations, consented to his execution.

Now Jesus was being seen in the same way. "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised," he said (Mark 6:16). Although popular among some, Jesus was arousing the suspicions, resentments and opposition of powerful people.

The dance and the mention of his family are intriguing but secondary details of the story that culminates in plain view of all, on a cross outside Jerusalem.

That story in plain sight can even give clues about the details. Remember that *denarius*? The week he was crucified Jesus was asked about taxes, a distraction from his message and ministry. He amazed them by taking a *denarius* and asking whose image is on the coin and where God's image can be seen (Mark 12:13-17).

For those who pay attention to the plain sense of the story that the Scriptures place front and center, for those who in their lives publicly bear the image given to them in baptism, it's in plain sight: The very heart of God is in plain sight in Jesus, crucified and risen from the dead. □

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