

THE LAST TO FLEE

Mark 14:43-52

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on Palm Sunday, March 25, 2018, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

Focus Passage

Immediately, while he was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; and with him there was a crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders. Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, 'The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him and lead him away under guard.' So when he came, he went up to him at once and said, 'Rabbi!' and kissed him. Then they laid hands on him and arrested him. But one of those who stood near drew his sword and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear. Then Jesus said to them, 'Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I were a bandit? Day after day I was with you in the temple teaching, and you did not arrest me. But let the scriptures be fulfilled.' All of them deserted him and fled.

A certain young man was following him, wearing nothing but a linen cloth. They caught hold of him, but he left the linen cloth and ran off naked.

In all four Gospels, soon after the triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, Jesus is *betrayed* by Judas, *arrested* by Roman soldiers, and immediately placed on trial in the middle of the night. In each Gospel, his disciples are *with him* when he is betrayed and arrested, and yet fall *away from him* as he is led away. Two gospels, Matthew and Mark, explicitly state: "...all the disciples deserted him and fled."

Alone among the Gospel writers, Mark adds two verses immediately after this scene of desertion. Mark writes:

A certain young man was following Jesus,
Wearing nothing but a linen cloth.
They caught hold of him,
But he left the linen cloth and ran off naked.

Only Mark makes mention of this young man.

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I would like us to engage in a bit of detective work to see who this young man might be. I want us to review several theories across the centuries over which much ink has been spilled, much parchment used, crumbled, and tossed away. I then want to propose a theory that I think can relate to us as we move from the Hosannas of Palm Sunday to Friday's Seven Last Words of Christ to the shouts of "He is risen!" with which we will awaken next Sunday.

Let us pray: *One of your scientists has remarked: "God is in the details." In the details of the young man fleeing at the arrest of your son, may we see a glimpse of you that teaches and challenges us. In the name of the one who was arrested that night we pray. Amen.*

I.

Who is this “young man” who is the last to flee the scene when Jesus is arrested?

- He may have been a *bystander*, perhaps a teenager awakened from his early morning sleep, by the sound of an arresting mob outside his window, just as when I drove to church this morning at 6:30 there were red fire engine lights at a house up the street and then a few blocks later on Cameron Mills a squad car and tow truck. Perhaps this young man was mistaken for as a follower of Jesus when in reality he was simply a curious onlooker.
- He may have been a recent, unnamed *follower* of Jesus, not a disciple, but someone who had heard Jesus preach and teach and seen him heal, and who, like the disciples, had left all to follow Jesus.
- He may have been someone Jesus had brought in to be close at hand, an unnamed *new disciple* Jesus was mentoring.
- On another level, this young man may actually have been the author of the Gospel of Mark, who wrote himself into its narrative just as Alfred Hitchcock made cameo appearances in 37 of his films¹ and Rembrandt likely have painted himself into one of his most famous painting, “The Night Watch.”²

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In addition to these real life possibilities concerning the identity of the young man, it is possible that he assumes a symbolic role in the Gospel of Mark as well.

- For example, this young man may lead us to recall from Genesis the early days in Pharaoh’s court when Joseph, also a young man, is accosted by Potiphar’s wife, flees her entreaties so as not to violate his relationship with his master, her husband, and leaves his robe behind in her grasping hand.³
- More broadly speaking, this young man may represent every Christian, who, when we undergo baptism, shed one life, one garment, and are re-clothed in another life, another garment.
- On the other hand, he may stand in contrast to Jesus’ disciples, who had “left everything” to follow Jesus, while he “leaves everything” to flee.
- Finally, this young man may be one of three of Jesus’ followers whose failure Mark fleshes out to show specific ways Jesus’ disciples let him down: adding to Judas’ betrayal⁴ and Peter’s denial⁵ the young man’s fleeing into the shadows.

It is amazing the possibilities with which preachers and teachers, scholars and ordinary readers of the Bible have come up over the centuries concerning who this young man might be and how he might speak to us.⁶

¹ See <http://www.filmsite.org/hitchcockcameos.html>.

² See <http://mentalfloss.com/article/64381/15-things-you-might-not-know-about-rembrandts-night-watch>.

³ Genesis 39:1-23.

⁴ Mark 14:43-50.

⁵ Mark 14:66-73.

⁶ A comprehensive account of these possibilities is found in Raymond E. Brown, S.S., *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 294-304.

II.

Now back to Hitchcock. Between 1927 and 1976, Alfred Hitchcock made fifty-two films that are still in existence. In thirty-nine of his films, Hitchcock himself makes a cameo appearance, lasting only a few seconds, usually as a minor character without a speaking part, undoubtedly unnoticed by many moviegoers.

- Sometimes Hitchcock walks across a scene carrying a musical instrument.
- Often he is using public transportation – boarding a bus, riding a train.
- Occasionally he appears as a passer-by in a public place: a train station, an airport, a crowded sidewalk.

Most of Hitchcock's cameos appear early in the movies, and in some he appears to be seeking to teach his audience, such as those in which with his rotund frame he holds open a newspaper on the back of which appears a weight-reduction visible to the moviegoers.⁷

Hitchcock's appearances in his own films come to mind because there is a serious strand of New Testament scholarship that considers it an intriguing possibility that the young man fleeing in Mark's gospel is in fact the author of Mark, who places himself in the gospel he writes in a concealed yet noticeable way so as to lead us, his readers, to receive a subtle yet important lesson.⁸

III.

If this is the case, what might Mark's message be to us, his readers?

(a)

On one level, it is clear that if Mark is writing himself into the story, he is making a confession; thereby, holding up for us the value of confession.

- Mark is confessing to himself, to God, to his readers, that, as we said earlier, though he, like the other disciples before him, had "left all" to follow Jesus, at the moment of Jesus' arrest, Mark "left all" – including his cloak – to flee.
- By writing this in his Gospel, Mark is engaging in self-examination.
- He is being honest with himself.
- He is being honest with God.
- And he is being honest with us his readers that though he was a well-intended follower of Jesus, when the chips were down, when the arrest was made, when the crucifixion was just around the corner, Mark was no more faithful than Peter who denied Jesus and Judas who betrayed him.

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⁷ See <http://www.filmsite.org/hitchcockcameos.html>.

⁸ See Brown, 294-304.

If we step back for a moment, we are reminded that there is value in confession: in being honest with God, in being honest with ourselves, in being honest with those around us.

- Just as faithful Catholics enter a confessional booth to make private confession before partaking of the body and blood of Christ
- Just as we join fellow congregants in making corporate confession of our sin before hearing the Word proclaimed and responding with our offerings and our being sent into the world to serve

so also Mark is confessing his flight into the shadows during one of the most important moments in the life of the Christ he has committed to follow.

*Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
Sometimes, it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.*

There is value in confession.

(b)

But in addition, by writing himself into the gospel that bears his name, Mark is also telling us that confession is not the final word; because even as Mark is honest with us about his own shortcoming, he subtly calls us not to repeat the sin he has committed.

Along these lines, there is an interesting strand of scholarship that connects the young man fleeing in Mark's gospel with a passage in the Old Testament prophecy of Amos that that I had never noticed before preparing this sermon. The passage is found in Amos 2, a chapter in which God is announcing judgment first on the nations of the world and then on his own people Israel for their failure and unfaithfulness. God speaks to Israel, his people, saying:

So, I will press you down in your place,
just as a cart presses down
when it is full of sheaves.

Flight shall perish from the swift,
and the strong shall not retain their strength...

those who handle the bow shall not stand,
and those who are swift of foot shall not save themselves,
nor shall those who ride horses save their lives;

and those who are stout of heart among the mighty
shall flee away naked on that day...⁹

Whenever we hear words such as these from prophecy, they can be so threatening and filled with punishment that it looks like there is no way out. But the reality is that by repeating intensely and even graphically the

⁹ Amos 2:13-16.

threat of punishment, the prophet is saying “If you will listen and change what you are doing, perhaps God will relent from punishment.”

Thus, when Amos says to the people of Israel: “Those who are stout of heart among the mighty shall flee away naked,” Amos is ironically saying: “Those who are stout of heart will turn their hearts toward God and use their stoutness of heart to do what God is calling them to do, they will *not* flee away naked.”

When the author of Mark writes himself into his gospel as one who “flees away naked,” I think he is subtly referencing this passage from Amos. I think Mark is saying that he has learned from his own failure, and he is calling his beloved readers in his day and across the centuries – including us who read him today – to keep our stoutness of heart – to hold onto our courage – and not to flee.

Hemingway famously defined courage as “grace under pressure.” Amos describes it as “stoutness of heart.” In confession, the writer of Mark revealed for us a time in which his stoutness failed, so that ours might not fail when such a time comes our way. Mark confesses and calls us to courage. This is his message for us as we begin the week in which Jesus faces the cross. Confession and courage.

IV.

I need not remind you that these are times in which we yearn for both confession and courage:

- In our national life
- In our politics
- In our workplaces
- In our marriages, relationships, families.

We are seeing great examples of courage, and great examples of cowardice. We are seeing people use the stoutness of heart God has given them, and we are seeing people who have the capacity for such stoutness flee instead into the shadows.

We know from the rest of the story in Mark’s gospel and others that when Judas betrays Christ, he ends out taking his own life¹⁰; and that when Peter denies Christ, he returns, is rehabilitated,¹¹ and becomes the first major leader in the church’s history.¹² It is always worth wondering what would have happened had Judas returned to Christ and given Christ the chance to rehabilitate him as well.

Concerning the young man who fled into the shadows, we do not know with a certainty what happened to him.

- If he was indeed the author of the Gospel of Mark, he left us his book and his teaching, and that in itself is an accomplishment.
- But even if he is not the author of the gospel in which he appears, we may not have seen the last of him.

Come next week, on Easter Sunday, and we will see if being “the last to flee” was the last time we see him.

Amen.

¹⁰ Matthew 27:3-10.

¹¹ John 21:15-19.

¹² Acts 2:14-36.