

Fleeing or Following
Mark 14:43-52
March 30, 2018 – Good Friday

Thirty pieces of silver bought the betrayal of a friend. Later that evening, one of his closest friends denied even knowing him, not once but three times out of fear for his own wellbeing. The Gospel tells us, “All of them deserted him and fled.” All of them... those who left their fishing boats to follow this itinerant preacher, one who gave up his lucrative job as a tax collector, one who had previously advocated for the overthrow of Rome by force, all of them... they *all* deserted him and fled.

But wait a minute. There is this one fellow... The Bible says there was the certain young man who followed. The authorities almost caught him. He was wearing nothing but a linen cloth; and the soldiers, temple police grabbed hold of that cloth. But the agile young guy, slipped out of the cloth and ran away naked. Who is this “young man,” this person who followed when everyone else fled? He’s never named. The original Greek is no more help than our English translation. In Greek he’s simply called the *neoniskos* – a word that’s not commonly used, but simply means a young male. What is the writer of Mark’s Gospel telling us about this young man? If it’s a puzzle to you, don’t feel bad. It was apparently a puzzle of Matthew and Luke; for, while they apparently know Mark’s Gospel and to a large degree copied Mark’s Gospel, they never mention this young man. But he’s there – following Jesus after his arrest, when everybody else fled.

And so I ask, where are you in this story? Are you among all those who fled, those who scattered when they sensed danger. Are you among those who would deny knowing Jesus in order to save your own skin? Would you betray him for a tidy sum of money? Or would you be the young man who would follow despite the risks.

Some have suggested that the young man is the “beloved disciple” of John’s Gospel. If you know the Gospel of John well, you know that there is this unnamed disciple, usually referred to as “the one whom Jesus loved.” Chapter 21 of John’s Gospel will name the “beloved disciple” as John, the Gospel’s author; but, many scholars claim that all of Chapter 21 is a later addition to the Gospel.

I believe the “beloved disciple” is intentionally unnamed, because I believe the “beloved disciple” is a place holder, an empty seat at the table; and I believe that the risen Christ is inviting each of us, you and me, to fill the place, to be the disciple whom Jesus loved. I also believe our certain unnamed young man in today’s story fills that same role. No, I don’t believe the young man was one of the twelve. I believe the young man is every person down through the past 2100 years that risked all they had to follow the risen Christ.

The scripture tells us that they grabbed hold of him, but the young man left the linen cloth and ran off naked. Now on a very real, historical level, I can picture

the temple police in boots and armor grabbing the cloth; and the young man slipping out of it and running; and what adult guard in full armor and outrun a naked youth?

But again, I find deeper meaning... The young man left everything in loyalty to his Lord. Remember the “rich ruler.” The rich ruler asked Jesus, “What must I do to attain eternal life?” and Jesus responded, “Go and sell all you have, give the money to the poor, then come and follow me.” The young man followed Jesus; and in the following, he left literally everything behind.

So again I ask, “What about you?”; and I must always also ask, “What about me?” Will we flee or will we follow? Will we be Peter who will deny him when the going gets difficult, or will we be that young man who will follow despite the risks, that person who will risk everything, even the clothes on our backs to follow the risen Lord?

Now I do need to say that, as I call the young man a “place holder,” I also recognize that age and gender are not significant. You can be the neoniskos, whether you’re male or female and whether you’re nine years old or ninety nine years old. We are never too young and never too old and never too male or female, black or white, gay or straight, rich or poor, healthy or ill – regardless of our circumstances, we are called – called to follow the risen Christ.

But the Gospel... the Gospel is always about Good News; and the Good News in this story is that Jesus loves all those young men and women, and older men and women who choose to follow. But Jesus also loves the Peter’s, those who would deny him to save themselves. Yes, Jesus died this very evening almost 2100 years ago; he died for the neoniski and he died for the Peter’s and he died for all people, that all people might have life through him. Paul says it at the end of the eighth chapter of his letter to the Romans: Nothing, absolutely nothing in all the world can separate us for the great love of God in Jesus Christ.

Still, there is more Good News about the Neoniskos. There is more Good News about our call to be the Neoniskos; but for that you’ll need to wait until Sunday; for it’s on Easter Sunday that we will learn the rest of the story.

Let us pray. . .

Holy Lord,

Give us the courage to follow

when others flee,

to follow in the path that you would have us walk,

the path of love, and joy, and peace.

Amen.

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