

March 11, 2018

Third Sunday of Lent

Mark 14: 26-52

Prayer: Dear God, We want our worship to be pleasing to you. It is the reason we are here. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Fashionistas

When my daughter Dustin was 25, and her sister Madison, 17, I took them to New York City for four days. Neither had visited there, so we made it a girls' trip, just the three of us.

In Times Square, you couldn't walk 20 feet without encountering people selling knock-off versions of brand-name purses. They had them spread on blankets, and kept an eye out for the police. Apparently, if they saw or heard the police coming, they would scoop all their merchandise into the blanket and run.

Well, Madison and I wouldn't know a Coco Chanel from a cup of cocoa. But Dustin was hyperventilating.

Ohmygosh, this would sell for \$500!, she kept telling us.

"Come on girls," I told them. "If you want to get arrested for buying counterfeit purses, you can do it at the Jockey Lot."

I wanted to teach them to ride the subway. We found an entrance to take a stairway down. And they balked.

“We’re not going down there,” they said. “We’ve seen the movies. People get killed down there.”

When I finally wrestled them onto a subway car, they agreed that this was a great thing. You could actually get around the city without being stabbed.

In fact, they were so comfortable that the next morning, they wanted to go off by themselves. I said, “Sure.” What I didn’t realize is that they were going in search of the best counterfeit purse bargains in New York.

Their search led them to Chinatown, where a man told them they could find even better deals if they would follow him underground. So they followed him down a dozen rickety steps into a cellar that led to another room and another. What they ultimately found was ... a room full of counterfeit purses.

That night when they were telling me about it, *I* began hyperventilating. “You did what? You went where? This from girls who are afraid of mass transit?”

Even they admitted it was probably a dangerous thing to do. But they were so laser-focused on those handbags, they were willing to take the risk.

Why do I tell that story? Because of the importance we allot to fashion. The importance we allot to acquiring stuff, things we are “wrapped up” in.

When we shut down our clothes closet at Triune several years ago, we didn’t get any pushback from shoppers. We got it from donors, people who cleared out their old clothes to

make room for new clothes. They were irritated with us because they wanted a place to accept their old clothes in a way they could feel good about.

So today, I'd like for us to think about being wrapped up in our stuff, as we look at a very odd two-sentence interlude in Mark's Passion narrative.

As some of you know, I love nothing more than running across one of these quirky little stories in our Scripture that have confounded scholars for generations. And there's a doozy in today's Scripture passage.

But first, some background. Fully a quarter of the gospels are devoted to the last week of Jesus's life. That's way too much to cover between Palm Sunday and Easter, so we are going to spend the last three Sundays of Lent reading from Mark's account of this tumultuous last week.

In chapter 11 of Mark's gospel, Jesus entered Jerusalem riding on a colt, with people throwing their cloaks and palm branches on the ground for the colt to walk on. The people shouted "**Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!**" (Mark 11: 9)

Then he visited the temple, that seat of authoritative Judaism, three times. One of those times, he drove out those who were buying and selling doves and overturned the money changers' tables. He would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple, essentially shutting down worship.

We think Mark's intent was to show that the temple – with its lavish requirements of buying and selling in order to worship properly -- was no longer central to the kingdom of God. Of

course, that statement was a great threat to those whose wealth was “wrapped up” in the temple commerce.

After three visits, Jesus left the temple and set up camp on the nearby Mount of Olives to teach. And listen to one of his teachings: **“Beware of the scribes, *who like to walk around in long robes* and to be greeted with respect in the market places and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”** (Mark 12: 38)

Beware of those *who like to walk around in long robes*. Beware of those for whom fashion, things of this world, are paramount.

Next in the narrative, the disciple Judas approached the chief priests and offered to betray Jesus. Jesus planned a Passover supper for his disciples, and predicted that one of them would, indeed, betray him.

That’s where we will start our reading today, at the end of the Passover meal that we call the Last Supper. Please turn in your Bibles to **Mark 14: 26-52**. Look for the betrayal that is woven into almost every line of this account.

26 When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. ²⁷And Jesus said to them, ‘You will all become deserters; for it is written,

“I will strike the shepherd,
and the sheep will be scattered.”

²⁸But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee.’

²⁹Peter said to him, 'Even though all become deserters, I will not.'³⁰ Jesus said to him, 'Truly I tell you, this day, this very night, before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times.'³¹ But he said vehemently, 'Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you.' And all of them said the same.

³² They went to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, 'Sit here while I pray.'³³ He took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be distressed and agitated.³⁴ And he said to them, 'I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake.'

³⁵ And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him.³⁶ He said, 'Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.'

³⁷ He came and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, 'Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep awake one hour?'³⁸ Keep awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.'³⁹ And again he went away and prayed, saying the same words.⁴⁰ And once more he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were very heavy; and they did not know what to say to him.

⁴¹ He came a third time and said to them, 'Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? Enough! The hour has come; the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners.'⁴² Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand.'

⁴³ 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.⁴⁴ 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.'⁴⁵ So when he came, he went up to

him at once and said, 'Rabbi!' and kissed him. ⁴⁶Then they laid hands on him and arrested him.

⁴⁷But one of those who stood near drew his sword and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear. ⁴⁸Then Jesus said to them, 'Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I were a bandit? ⁴⁹Day after day I was with you in the temple teaching, and you did not arrest me. But let the scriptures be fulfilled.'

⁵⁰*All of them deserted him and fled.*

⁵¹ A certain young man was following him, wearing nothing but a linen cloth. They caught hold of him, ⁵²but he left the linen cloth and ran off naked.

If you're wondering, those last two verses are the odd part. The temple guards grabbed a young man by his cloak, and he ran off naked.

But there's a lot going on here before we get to this Marx Brothers routine. Mark, more than any other gospel writer, presents Jesus as abandoned and forsaken. **"My God, my God,"** he will cry out on the cross, **"why have you forsaken me?"**

And in this passage, he is certainly painting Jesus as forsaken by his closest friends.

Judas sells him out.

He predicts that Peter will deny him – and we learn later than Peter does exactly that.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, shown in our window here, Jesus asks Peter, James and John three times to stay awake with him. Three times they disappoint him by falling asleep.

And finally, after his arrest, we read, **"All of them deserted him and fled."**

All of them who echoed Peter, all of them who said they would *die* before they would deny him -- *all of them deserted him and fled.*

In this Passion narrative, Mark is picturing an abandoned, betrayed, forsaken Savior.

But what about this odd little story at the end? It is so strange that it's almost comedy. Slapstick comedy.

“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.”

That's it. We never hear again from this first-century stalker.

Bible scholars are all over the map about who this young man might be and what his presence here might mean.

Some say he's the apostle John.

Some say James, brother of Jesus.

Some say it's a reference to the prophecy of Amos, who said that on Judgment Day, **“those who are stout of heart among the mighty shall flee away naked.”** (Amos 2: 16)

Some say the young man is the gospel writer, Mark, himself.

Some say he's the same young man who will appear in Jesus' tomb a few days later, dressed in a white robe.

Some see him as a true follower, who stayed with Jesus right up until the temple guard snatched him naked.

And some see him as *one more person* who deserted Jesus by running off.

I think the betrayal of one more person is partially it. There are Peter, James and John, who betray through their sleepiness or fear. There is Judas who betrays for money or out of concern for where Jesus was headed politically, however you read those texts.

There are “all of them” who take off.

And there is this young man who hangs in -- until his “stuff” is taken. At that point, even he flees.

“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.”

We cannot serve both God and mammon, Jesus tells us in the gospel of Matthew. We cannot serve both God and wealth.

Perhaps this linen cloth is a symbol of all that binds us, all that wraps us in our worldly concerns, all the fashion and cars and houses and status that we get wrapped up in.

There is nothing that I like better than finding these quirky little nuggets in the middle of our Scriptures because it makes me wonder what the writer was up to. Because they are nothing less than planted clues.

As I have mentioned before, when I speak to book clubs, they inevitably ask how early in the writing process I know the plot. This time last year, I was at work on the mystery that will come out this summer. And I had to admit, I was 100 pages in, and not only did I not know the murderer, I didn't know the victim.

So when I figured all that out, I had to go back and plant clues.

It made me wonder if that's what Mark had done. When he got to the crucifixion and the part about Joseph of Arimathea wrapping Jesus's body in a linen cloth, did he remember this young man on the night of so many betrayals?

Did he remember that he'd stayed by Jesus until he was snatched naked?

Did he want us to make a connection between the linen cloth that wrapped Jesus only after he gave his life ... and the linen cloth that caused the young man to bolt to save his own?

Why else to include such a strange little interlude that could so easily have been left out?

Was Mark commenting on a way of life that was present in the first century but has been unimaginably magnified in the 21st? A preoccupation with our stuff that can cause us to betray Jesus.

The self-storage industry in the United States took in \$38 billion last year. \$38 billion for people to store stuff they can't fit into their houses or attics or basements. I know some of it is temporary storage as people are moving. That makes sense.

But a lot of it is purely for overflow. I'd like to get some of that money to build storage for people – in other words, affordable housing.

But believe me, I am preaching to myself here. Nothing is more satisfying to me than carrying bags of old stuff out of my house and into a thrift store.

But what is that stuff doing there to begin with? And how much of my life do I spend organizing it, storing it, insuring it, protecting it?

Far too much.

Betrayal can be overt. But it can also be insidious.

I imagine that most of us are like Peter, who say we would never deny our Lord. Most of us are like the other disciples who all agreed, *Nope, we'd never leave you.*

At least until we got to the point of being stripped of our earthly stuff. Until the point that Jesus came between us and our belongings, our security, our possessions, our things.

Let us beware of wrapping ourselves in those things to the point of betrayal.

Amen.