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Mark 14:43-52

41st Message

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## THE SON OF MAN SEIZED

Earlier this year I received one of those phone calls that is a parent's worst nightmare. One of our leading families at the local high school had just lost their 21-year-old son in a car accident. I have a deep kinship with this family. Their three children are the same ages as our three, and at one time I had been their oldest daughter's softball coach. Now I was being asked to officiate at their son's funeral. What do you say when the unthinkable happens? Parents always pray for their children's safety, that God would grasp them in his strong right hand, but what does a mother or father do after something like this occurs? They feel abandoned and left alone to pick up the ashes.

Our text this morning from the gospel of Mark will speak to this kind of pain. Before the advent of the Messiah, the prophet Isaiah predicted the care that he would receive at the hands of the Father:

*"I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness,  
I will also hold you by the hand and watch over you."* (Isa 42:6)

And again:

*"For I am the Lord your God, who upholds your right hand,*

*Who says to you, 'Do not fear, I will help you.'"* (Isa 41:13)

Isaiah went on to say that as a result of God seizing him in his right hand, the Messiah would be made like a sharp, double-edged threshing sledge that would thresh and pulverize the mountains and make the hills like chaff (Isa 41:14-16). That was the promise: "I will lay hold of you in my hand and your enemies will be as dust." In this text, Mark uses that same word "lay hold of" (or "seize"<sup>1</sup>) four times (Mark 14:44,46,49,51). It is the key word of the text. Instead of God laying hold of the Son of Man, however, it is God's enemies who seem to have all the power to seize him. God seems painfully absent, and apparently allows his enemies free rein.

What a worst case scenario! In our text, Mark wants his readers to focus on the different reactions of the disciples when evil appears to have the upper hand and the night grows cold. But, in a surprising ending, he paints a tiny portrait of hope to help penetrate the darkness.

### I. The Son of Man Betrayed and Arrested Mark 14:43-50

**And immediately while He was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, came up, accompanied by a multitude with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the scribes and the elders. Now he who was betraying Him had given them a signal, saying, "Whomever I shall kiss, He is the one; seize Him, and lead Him away under guard." And after coming, he immediately went to Him, saying, "Rabbi!" and kissed Him. And they laid hands on Him, and seized Him. But a certain**

**one of those who stood by drew his sword, and struck the slave of the high priest, and cut off his ear. Jesus answered and said to them, "Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest Me, as against a robber? Every day I was with you in the temple teaching, and you did not seize Me; but this has happened that the Scriptures might be fulfilled." And they all left Him and fled.** (Mark 14:43-50, NASB)

As Jesus finishes his rebuke of the disciples about their sleeping instead of watching, a figure emerges from out of the darkness. It is Judas, one of his very own, one of the twelve. Behind him is a mob made up of a detachment of well-trained Roman troops, together with the official temple police, sent from the Sanhedrin (Luke 22:52; John 18:30). Mark says that they appeared somewhat overdressed for the occasion. They were armed to the teeth: flak jackets, Uzi submachine guns, riot gear — the lot.

During festival times, the Romans were especially cautious to ensure that there would be no disruption of the public peace. In light of Jesus' great popularity, they expected to meet some resistance; therefore their mission had to be well rehearsed. First, they had to pick a time and place when Jesus would be off the public stage so that the arrest could be conducted in secret, thus avoiding any possibility of violence. Next, a signal had to be prearranged to mark Jesus out from the crowd of disciples. The sign had to be well thought out, since it was the dark of night and not everyone knew who Jesus was. The signal Judas chose was a kiss, an act that would forever transform that tender symbol of affection into one of betrayal. Once Jesus was identified the troops were to move in quickly and decisively, and "lead Jesus away securely — with no chance of escape. Once having become involved in the wicked affair, Judas did not want to make a fiasco of it."<sup>2</sup>

Judas had probably escorted the mob to the privacy of the upper room but, finding it empty, he chose the next logical spot where he thought they might find Jesus. Leading the cadre down the Kidron valley to Gethsemane and entering the garden, he easily slips past the watchmen. Beholding Jesus, he throws his arms open wide to embrace his teacher. "Rabbi," he exclaims. Then the betrayer kisses his master. This was no light peck on the cheek, but a lengthy kiss, heightening the Lord's pain, and our disgust. The ancient proverb stings: "Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but excessive are the kisses of an enemy" (Prov 27:6).

The signal now given, the horde of soldiers descends upon their defenseless victim, and they seize and arrest him. In the ensuing chaos an unnamed disciple grabs his sword and, in an attempt to defend his master, only succeeds in wounding the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear. "John tells us it was Peter who wielded the sword,

and that the ear belonged to Malcus, a servant of the high priest (John 18:10). Apparently, Peter aimed at his head; but Malcus sidestepped, and Peter only caught his ear (or perhaps just the lobe, since Jesus was said to have healed it and not replaced it - Luke 22:51).<sup>3</sup> Peter, who did not prepare himself in prayer, suddenly is seized with an impulse to live up to his bold promise of dying loyalty. But sadly, his action is misguided in its zeal, and surprisingly short-lived. Such actions only confirm Jesus' earlier words, "the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." The incident may also contain a touch of irony, foreshadowing a "deaf" high priest who will refuse to listen to Jesus (14:63ff).

The turning point in the scene<sup>4</sup> comes with Jesus' speech. Confronted by the intimidating military mob he neither resists nor flees, he neither fights nor runs. Strengthened in prayer, he stands steady and calm, ready to receive his betrayer. As always, Jesus speaks with authority. His words penetrate with a power rarely found on the human tongue.

**"Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest Me, as against a robber? Every day I was with you in the temple teaching, and you did not seize Me;**

Before they complete their evil act, Jesus forces them to face who they are by exposing their evil motives. Why were they arresting him in this manner, armed to the teeth as if he were a violent insurrectionist when in fact he was merely a rabbi? ("*Insurrectionist*" is a better translation of the Greek term than *robber*.) One can sense the biting sarcasm: "Aren't you a little overdressed for the occasion?" And why at this time, in the dark, in secret, when day after day he was easily accessible in his public teaching? The arrest reveals far more about their motives than his alleged crimes.

Jesus' next statement does not remove their culpability, but displays his confident trust in the Sovereign God:

**"but this has happened that the Scriptures might be fulfilled."<sup>5</sup>**

Here we can see the effect that Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane had on him. God had so strengthened him that he could expose and condemn their motives, and yet he could see that in God's sovereignty they would be free to play all their evil cards. It was "necessary that the Scriptures might be fulfilled." "He was numbered among the transgressors" (Isa 53:12). It is a great gift to be able to discern between the evil choices of men and the invisible hand of God directing all things for the establishment of the kingdom. This is the supreme fruit of prayer: a resolute trust in God in the face of the treacherous scheming of men.

As Jesus speaks the final word "*fulfilled*," all his disciples flee, every last one. "The words drive home, as it were with hammer-blow, the failure of the disciples without exception and the complete forsakenness of Jesus."<sup>6</sup> With the flight of the disciples, Zechariah's long awaited words are fulfilled,

**"Awake, O sword, against My Shepherd,  
And against the man, My Associate,"  
Declares the LORD of hosts.  
"Strike the Shepherd that the sheep may be scattered."  
(Zech 13:7)**

As the scene ends we are left in the throes of divine mystery. The Son of Man, to whom Daniel said would be-

long all power and authority forever and ever, is now *seized* (the term has been used three times) by his enemies and abandoned by his friends. The long-awaited Son of Man, who would be victorious over all world powers, amazingly, has fallen victim to them.

As we grope to understand the meaning of these events, Mark adds to the mystery. An anonymous bystander now takes center-stage.

## II. The Young Man Is Seized But Escapes

Mark 14:51-52

**And a certain young man was following Him, wearing a linen sheet over his naked body; and they seized him. But he left the linen sheet behind, and escaped naked.**

Enter an unnamed young man. In contrast to the disciples who are fleeing at this critical hour, the young man is said to be "following" Jesus. And, in contrast to the overdressed mob, he is decidedly underdressed, clothed only with a linen garment over his naked body. This suggests that he was wealthy, since the garment described is not an undergarment but an outer tunic or sheet. Normally this was made of wool, but this one is made of linen, an extremely expensive material worn only by the rich.

Who is this mysterious onlooker to the arrest of Jesus? Scholars have speculated that the young man is John Mark, the author of the gospel. He in fact did come from a wealthy home, and the setting for the upper room could very well have been his own home. We can well imagine him on Passover night, unable to sleep in the warm April air. As he tosses and turns on his bed, he senses a strange foreboding in the air. The inquisitive teenager climbs out his window and scampers through the dark streets of Jerusalem to view the events in the nearby Kidron valley. He comes upon the scene in Gethsemane, clothed only in his linen sheet. As Jesus is arrested, the soldiers spot him hiding among the trees. They lay their hands on him and seize him, but he manages to wiggle out of linen tunic, escaping naked back into the night air. Scholars surmise that this is Mark's way of adding his signature to his work. As Theodore Zan remarks, "Mark paints a small picture of himself in the corner of his work."<sup>7</sup>

The scholars may well be right, but I think the function of the anonymous young man may also serve another purpose. Gundry suggests that the double emphasis of the linen cloth,

anticipates the linen cloth in which Jesus will be buried (15:46). The young man's nakedness, except for the linen cloth, may anticipate the soldiers' dividing Jesus' garments among themselves (cf. 15:24 with 15:21; also nakedness as precursive to resurrection, 1 Cor 15:37; 2 Cor 5:3; 1 Clem 24:1-5)...Leaving the linen cloth behind anticipates Jesus' resurrection, portrayed as a leaving behind of his linen burial cloth. Mark will also call the angel in the empty tomb 'a young man' to recollectively associate the present young man with Jesus' resurrection. [That young man will not be wearing a linen cloth, but a white robe symbolic of the resurrection life.] Though neither young man is Jesus himself, together they represent him in his death, burial and resurrection...And just as the young man flees the scene of Jesus' arrest, so the women who discover the emptiness of Jesus' tomb will flee the scene of his resurrection.<sup>8</sup>

What then is the purpose of this incident? Mark shows that though the worst possible thing happens — the Son Man is seized — that will not be the last word. The evil of men may have free rein to execute their plans to the fullest, but, in a glorious resurrection there will be a grand reversal of our Lord's arrest, crucifixion and burial.

### III. The Fourfold Response to Seizure

Our text leaves us with the question, Where do we find ourselves in the story of this dark night? If we stand back and take in the whole scene, we discover that every player in this story is reacting to Jesus' betrayal and arrest, which is the opening display of the shame of the cross in all its scandal of weakness. This story recounts the human reaction of the disciples when they are confronted with Jesus' humiliation and he allows evil to overpower and consume him. Our response is highly significant. If we don't get it right here, we won't get it right when it's our turn to act out our part in the sacred story. How will we respond when the unthinkable occurs and we are asked to drink this cup?

#### A. Judas — betrayal for benefit

Mark gives four different responses, represented by Judas, Peter, the twelve, and finally, the anonymous young man. First, the response of Judas, one of the twelve. We can't be sure when Judas purposed in his heart to betray Jesus. Was it on one of the occasions when Jesus made known his kingdom agenda, saying that he came to die and under no circumstances would he carry out a political revolution by force? To Judas, the thought of swallowing the world's pain was shameful at best. Surely Peter's impulsive cry, "You shall not die," echoed Judas' sentiments as well. The only difference was that Peter, unlike Judas, was teachable. When Jesus shot back at Peter that shameful rebuke, "Get behind me, Satan," Judas' blood boiled. He would not submit.

Perhaps the point of no return came when Jesus chose a colt, the symbol of humility, for his entry into the city. If that was to be Jesus' way, Judas would have none of it. Perhaps he felt betrayed, having given up everything to follow Jesus. Swallowed in his own disillusionment, he chose another path. He would remain in the role of intimate follower, appearing loyal and lavish in his affection for Jesus. Beneath the guise of affection, however, he would seek to use Jesus for his own personal gain. Betray him with a kiss, and in the process make a buck. That is the Judas way. This betrayal for money made such an impact on the disciples that the early church took measures to ensure it did not happen again. The *Didachè*, the first century handbook of Christian instruction, says that if a traveling apostle ever asked for money he was to be considered a false prophet: "And let the apostle when he goes forth take nothing except bread (enough to last him) till he reach his lodgings for the night. But if he ask for money he is a false prophet." Sadly, our generation has not heeded the warning. The world's perception of the church is the Judas view: Christian leaders using the humiliation of Christ for personal gain.

#### B. Peter — fight

The second response is represented by Peter, the one who was sleeping instead of being vigilant and praying. He is ill-prepared for the crisis. Faced with the prospect of

Jesus' arrest, he is seized by an uncontrollable urge to fight back. An unbridled impulse grips him and he lunges into action, crossing that sacred boundary and making an illicit reach for a weapon of this world. He is not very skilled at using it, however. He can't even hit his mark, and leaves behind a bloody mess. This is a sad commentary on what results whenever we attempt to fight evil with the weapons of this world. After the blood is spilled there are no winners and there is no redemption. And it is difficult to erase the memory for the victims, the slaves whose ears we have lopped off. Ask a Jew today what the symbol of the cross means to him. I have found very few whose image is the Isaiah's Suffering Servant, or the Lamb of God who was slain on our behalf. More often than not they are gripped with pain as they recall the horror of the Holocaust or the pogroms when they were labeled Christ-killers. The message is clear: put away your sword.

#### C. The Disciples — flee

To these two responses, Mark adds a third: flight. As Jesus takes command of the situation, by exposing true motives and placing his confidence in God's sovereign hand, all the disciples flee. When the die seems cast and the cross looms imminent, fear takes over, and flight seems to be the only way out. We can't do anything to resist evil, so we flee to the desert or the mountains. Removing ourselves from the crossroads of the world we flee the schools, the community centers and the halls of justice and surround ourselves with other disillusioned followers. We are content to warm ourselves at their hearths and wait until everything has been accomplished. Many Christians spend their retirement years doing just that. But Mark says that is not an option. We can run from the garden but we can't escape the pain.

#### D. The Young Man — following Jesus

The fact that all three of these responses are played out by the disciples suggests these temptations will be common to the church. But Mark suggests that though these will be our most natural reactions to the humiliation of the cross, hidden within the text is a fourth way. An unnamed youth makes a cameo appearance in the gospel. Approaching the scene as a hidden observer, he arrives with no weapons and very little clothing. So captivated is he by what he sees, he continues to follow Jesus, even when everyone else has fled. Here then is one who does not fight or flee. Suddenly he is drawn into the very center of the drama, *seized* by the same fate as Jesus. Outmanned and outgunned, death looks inevitable. But, though he endures the humiliation of his own nakedness, amazingly he is given back his life and escapes unscathed, leaving his wealth (*the linen sheet*) behind. Is Mark saying that this is a foretaste of the resurrection life given to those who are willing to endure the cross and yet despise the shame? I think it is. But notice that this long-range view is so important, God takes great care to leave behind fragrant hints of it even while we are trampled by our worst fears.

As a pastor I've learned in these times of great tragedy to be observant for these heavenly signs. As I entered the home of our friends who had just lost their son, I was greeted by two parents numbed by the pain. But after a few moments the mother escorted me into her son's bedroom, and there on the wall was a new poster he had recently put over his bed. It was a photograph of a magnificent sunset over the desert. Underneath it read, "When you

see a sign from Heaven.” That photo would become the cover for their memorial service program, and I spoke on why I believe in heaven.

The sad thing about Mark’s text is, because the disciples fled in fear they missed the encouraging sign from heaven. I, too, have fled, and missed the encouraging signs as well. One of my most painful moments came on Friday, December 2nd 1976. I got a call from the hospital saying that my newborn daughter was very sick. One medical test told the whole story: she had the same enzyme deficiency that my son had, and she would not live. I made one last trip to the hospital with a friend to visit my daughter Jessica. I could only gaze at her a short time before I turned away, unable to bear the pain. As I left the hospital waves of grief came crashing over me. I wanted to weep, but I was too embarrassed to weep in front of my friends. I was not there when my daughter Jessica died. She died alone, abandoned by her father. When the hospital graciously offered to take care of her body, I welcomed that. I could not bear the thought of laying her little body in the ground. How could we have another memorial service? The thought was too morbid to me. So, like the disciples, I ran.

Sixteen years later, God called me back to that same hospital. Again, it was in December, and it was raining (just as it was when my two children died). Another son of one of our church families was about to die. I did not want to go, but I was mysteriously yet powerfully drawn to watch as this wonderful couple loved their son and refused to turn away from grief. As he lay dying, we held hands around his bed and sang hymns and psalms. After we had sung the first verse of the hymn, *It Is Well With My Soul*, I looked around for someone else to lead, because I didn’t know all the words of the second verse. At the foot of the bed stood an unnamed nurse, clothed in white. She knew the verses, and she lifted up her beautiful voice and sang forcefully. It was as if angels had come into the room. Heaven united with earth, and love burst our breasts. We felt a transcendent sense of peace, of power and victory over death. I’ll never forget it.

God was gracious to call me back to my Gethsemane to see what I did not want to see, that sign from heaven that I had run away from. I discovered that, even when I left my daughter, He was there all along, caring with a love that transcended death. Following that evening, I composed these lines as an offering to the God of Gethsemane:

*O Holy night, angels sang,  
The grip of night grew limp,  
He appeared  
And each soul felt its worth.*

*He did not turn away  
Traumatized by pain  
But stretched out His hand  
And placed it into the flame.*

*Beyond His hand I saw  
The wrist - impaled by my spear  
Pierced so deep with wounds  
Yet draws me near.*

*Beyond the wrist, His gaze,  
O that gaze, ablaze ablaze  
With such love it burst my breast  
Evoking deepest praise.*

*O death where is thy victory,  
O grave where is thy sting?*

*Captured with awe, I stared and stared  
And then I knew,  
That when I left,  
He had cared for you.*

Amen.

1. “to seize” - *krateo* - means to take into one’s possession or custody, as to apprehend, arrest, often by force.
2. Walter W. Wessel, “Mark,” *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 766.
3. Wessel.
4. The text follows a beautifully constructed chiasmic pattern:
  - A. The Son of Man betrayed by a well known friend, 14:43-46 then seized by an ‘overdressed’ mob
  - B. One **disciple** fights 14:47
  - X. Jesus’ speech** 14:48,49
    - publicly exposes the evil motives of his secret seizure while *simultaneously* publicly trusts in the sovereign plan of the Almighty God
  - B’. All **disciples** flee 14:50
  - A’. One unknown young man seized by the mob, 14:51,5, but escapes naked.
5. On the Scriptures being *fulfilled*, Gundry notes not only Zech 13:7, but also Exod 24:8; Isa 53:12; Psa 22:2;8-9, 19; 41:9; 69:21; 109:25; Lam 2:15. Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 861.
6. C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (Cambridge, 1959) 438.
7. Quoted from Michael Green’s lectures on Mark at Regent College, Vancouver, B.C.
8. Gundry, 862-863.