

Running Naked
Mark 14:26-52
First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights
May 30, 2010
Pastor Dave Carver

Do you have “abandonment issues”? Chances are that at least by someone’s definition, you do. “Abandonment issues” is a catch-all phrase in psychology that people use to explain all sorts of emotions and behavior. I do not want to suggest in any way that I am making light of these issues – but I do want to suggest that this is a hot topic right now. I Googled “books on abandonment issues” and came up with 3.2 million hits in less than half a second. Search for “I have abandonment issues” and you’ll get 625,000 hits in a third of a second.

When we say “abandonment issues”, we are referring to feelings of dis-ease that can be traced to having been left in the lurch – maybe by a parent, a trusted friend, a spouse. According to psychotherapist Sue Anderson, the origin of abandonment issues often begins very early in life. Even an infant may feel the fear of being left alone with no one to care for her. Other root causes of an abandonment issue may include the loss of a parent or a teenage breakup. Anderson explains that these situations are cumulative and contribute significantly to our relationships with others as an adult.¹

As I read over the text from Mark this morning, I wondered, “Did Jesus suffer from abandonment issues?” If he didn’t, he surely could have. Maybe he should have. I mean, this chapter is a case study in abandonment.

Immediately following the last supper, Jesus and his closest friends head out to their favorite retreat center, where he tells them that they’ll all leave him. Of course, they deny it. But then take a look at what happens next: first, his most trusted and loyal friends can’t be bothered to stay awake while he prays. Is it

¹ <http://www.livestrong.com/article/69862-abandonment-issues/#ixzz0p95DwTQF>

apathy? Laziness? General cluelessness? An inability to keep up with Jesus' schedule that simply overwhelmed them? We don't know. All we know is that twice on the same evening, the men that Jesus counted on to be there for him were not. They failed him.

We see a more treacherous and deliberate face of abandonment in the next passage, where Judas, who has eaten with Jesus, traveled with Jesus, taught with Jesus – who has been trusted by Jesus and the others for three years – now approaches his friend in the Garden and calls to him tenderly. He kisses him on the cheek. And then he earns the money that the religious leaders have paid him as he betrays Jesus into the hands of those who wish him dead.

Finally, our reading for this morning ends with a curious account of an unnamed young man who is so afraid of being associated with Jesus and his followers that he runs naked into the darkness that envelops the Mount of Olives.

And although it's not included in our reading this morning, Mark chapter 14 also includes the account of Peter's denial of Jesus after Jesus was arrested.

Now here's something interesting. Mark has sixteen chapters. Of all of them, chapter fourteen is the longest. And the lengthiest narratives in this, the longest chapter of the gospel, deal with people who turn their back on Jesus, who abandon him, who let him down, or who sell him out. There are about 650 verses in the Gospel of Mark. More than 5% of them deal with issues of betrayal or denial. To put it another way, Mark mentions these people who compromise their relationships with Jesus in much greater detail than he talks about the birth of Jesus (which, in fact, he doesn't even mention) or the resurrection of Jesus (which gets only a few sentences). What's that all about? Why does Mark make such a big deal out of this?

The only answer I can come up with is that questions of betrayal and denial must have been an issue in the community to

which Mark was writing. I have a hunch that Mark didn't need to write much about Jesus' birth or resurrection because the people to whom he wrote understood those things – they weren't a problem. However, his emphasis on the ways that Jesus' closest friends turn their backs on him – or even turn him in – must be an indicator that this kind of behavior was not unknown in Mark's community.

And really, how could it not be? If you were here when we began our study of this gospel, you'll remember that it was written at a time of great upheaval in the Christian church. Mark's little community in Rome was being torn apart by persecution from Emperor Nero's government, and daily people were being killed for their faith. Families and churches were being split apart as the Emperor tried to set public opinion against the small group of Christians. Can you imagine living in fear that you'd be arrested simply for practicing your faith? What if your husband's parents were Christians, and they came to your door and threatened your children? Can you see how a time of fear and crisis could lead to panic among the believers? Can you see how easy it would be to simply pretend not to know what was going on? Or to point the centurions to the neighbors down the street if only they promised to leave your wife and children alone?

When we introduced the gospel of Mark, we talked about it as a "pamphlet for hard times" – a document written to encourage the believers in the face of struggle. Well, if that's true, then this is the section of that document that points out that the reality of the situation is that Jesus' entire inner circle blew it. In verse 50 we read that everyone deserted Jesus and fled. Everyone.

In the days to come, the church would have no ability to say, "You know, if only we had more Peters in our midst", or "Yes, we should have listened to Andrew. He did well all along." Out of all the people we've met in Mark, Jesus alone remained true to his calling. Mark tells us that it was a struggle for him, too – that there was a temptation for him to stop doing what he was sent to do, to give up, to turn aside – but that somehow his time in prayer encouraged him to go on. But the rest of us? Forget it. We

caved in.

And it wasn't even only the "all stars" of the faith, the twelve, or the people we've already met. Our reading today ends with a curious account of an unnamed teenager who flees. We've mentioned that Mark is the shortest of all the gospels. He leaves a lot of details out. But here he includes this weird little account of a scared kid running out on Jesus. Why would he do that?

The tradition of the church tells us that the reason the author of Mark included this little story is that it was his way of putting himself in the story. In this gospel we've met some amazing characters: Peter, James, John, Mary, Bartimaeus, the Syro-phoenecian woman...and now Mark is saying, "Yes, I was there, too. And yes, I blew it, too. I can't tell you this story about how everyone else let Jesus down without telling you that I, too, was to blame."

Beloved, this is why I think that Mark makes such a big deal about these various accounts of betrayal and abandonment: I think that this is Mark's way of saying "Look, the question is not whether or not you will fail in your attempt to lead a perfect Christian life. You will blow it. You will, sooner or later, find yourself running naked into the darkness. The question is, what will you do next?"

Mark told these stories of abandonment and betrayal while he was sitting at Peter's side – in a Roman prison. Peter had denied Christ – everyone knew that. But afterwards, Peter grew through that experience and was able to stand up in the face of persecution. And Mark himself had grown from the nervous teenager who panicked into a man who was committed to telling the world the good news of the savior.

With the sole exception of Jesus, there's nobody in Mark's gospel who gets it right all of the time. People fall. People lie. People abandon their core principles. When the early disciples ran away from Jesus, they wound up running back into each other's arms, where they confessed their failure and tried to look

ahead...everyone, that is, except for Judas. Judas failed, and felt like he couldn't return to the twelve, and so the book of Acts begins with an account of Judas running away from his betrayal and into his own death – because he couldn't handle the knowledge of his own sin.

If Mark's community was going to survive, they were going to have to answer these questions:

- what do you do when you've failed?
- what do you do when someone else has failed?

Can we take a word of encouragement from the gospel this morning – even though it is a difficult word? The good news is that Jesus does not give up on the people who run away from him naked in the dark. Jesus did not hold it against Peter, or Andrew, or Mark. Jesus – who, as we've said, was the only one to not buckle under the stress and pressure of this situation – is the one who says, “come. Come home.”

Friends, you have run. Or you feel like running. Or you've been running for a long time and hope that no one notices. If you are in a position this morning where you have betrayed your core beliefs; if you have compromised in a way that leaves you feeling guilty and unlovable; if you sense that you've been running away from the Lord and his best for you for a long time, know this: you don't have to run. You don't have to fear. If there was room in the church for Peter and James and John and Andrew and Mark...there's room for you.

And let's also take a word of challenge from the gospel as well. Because Mark is so clear about the fact that everyone has deserted Jesus, then the church has no call to pass judgment on those who show up here and say, “Wow, I've been running for a long time. Can I stop?” The answer is always “Yes!” and “Welcome.”

In the middle of the last century, the Chinese government expelled Christian missionaries from that country. They made

Christianity a crime. The number of Christians in the country was a tiny percentage of the population, and people were afraid that Mao's government would wipe out the church.

But something happened. Yes, some believers recanted their faith and gave up on the church. But others kept meeting in secret. Towards the end of the century, the church was again made legal, and the world discovered that rather than squelching the church, the persecution had strengthened it. One scholar estimates that there were fewer than four million Christians in China in 1949.² In recent years, the government has eased the restrictions on the church. And, to the surprise of some, many people who had left the church are coming back. Their contemporaries are torn – they refer to these people who left as “Judases”. There is opposition to including them in the mainstream life of the church – but they are being accepted. And the fruit of these years of “darkness” in the church is amazing. The current estimate is that there may be as many as a hundred million believers in China.³

People of God, look around. The world is full of people who are running naked in the dark – filled with shame about something that they have done or someplace that they have been. Know that the grace of God is for you and for them...if there is one thing that Mark wants us to know, it's that it is impossible to run away from the gift of life that Christ offers. May we know that for ourselves, and may we share that with others. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

² Churches and Christians in China, 1950-1967: Fragments of Understanding, by M. Searle Bates © 1968 Pacific Affairs, University of British Columbia. <http://www.jstor.org/pss/2754795>

³ http://www.cbn.com/spirituallife/BibleStudyAndTheology/Discipleship/persecution_112702.aspx