

You've surely heard the title but probably not read the poem. But here is the beginning of Francis Thompson's 1893 poem called "The Hound of Heaven."

*I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;  
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;  
I fled Him, down labyrinthine ways/ Of my own mind, and in the midst of tears  
I hid from Him, and under running laughter.  
Up vistaed slopes I sped / And shot, precipitated  
Adown Titanic glooms of chasmed fears,  
From those strong Feet, that followed, followed after.*

It reminds me of Edgar Allen Poe, with Titanic glooms and chasmed fears, not to mention "those strong Feet that followed, followed after". Quoth the Raven 'Nevermore!' Being followed is a little creepy.

Thompson's language has that Victorian flourish, but he is on to something real. We flee God, but God follows after. This is what Jesus tells the mean old Pharisees who grumble because He likes to have dinner and drinks with normal, non-religious people in today's gospel reading.

The Pharisees probably overhear Jesus laughing at the sinners' off-color jokes and decide it is high time to pull the Teacher aside and "speak the truth to him in love." In response to the little pharisaical accountability group, Jesus tells a couple stories about who the real God is. The real God, He says, follows after sinners. And He follows after sinners, because we flee Him.

I fled Him down the nights and down the days. Why would you flee God? Why would you run away from God? Why would you hide from God?

The answer has an ancient beginning. Adam and Eve were the first to flee, all the way back in the Garden of Eden. "*They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden.*" Adam and Eve fled from God because they had sinned and they wanted to hide from God.

Adam and Eve are first in a long parade of people who flee from God because of their sin. God's Law works in our hearts, convicting us of sin. People are instinctively aware of this, somewhere beneath the layers of self-justification and anesthesia. We work really hard to silence the voice of the Law.

For example, while Christie's yoga class was meditating after a strenuous pose, the instructor told the class to travel in their minds and souls to the "Beach of Generosity and Non-Judgment." Can you imagine a better place! I want to live on the Beach of Generosity and Non-Judgment, forevermore. But every time I try to go there, and get

settled in on my beach chair, with my book and my little umbrella drink, somebody that I would rather not see walks up and tells me what I've done or left undone.

How on earth does that guy get onto my Beach of Generosity! And often times that guy is me, more often than not I am a "*severe and speechless critic, who can terrorize us and urge us on to futile activity, and in the end judge us more severely for the errors into which his own reproaches drove us*". (T.S. Eliot, *The Elder Statesman*)

He walks right on the beach and steals my umbrella drink because that is the way the Law works. Not a perfect analogy because I feel certain that Jesus liked both beaches and umbrella drinks, but I'm trying to say that you cannot just create your own rules or your own judgment free existence. And you usually end up judging yourself. Paul says in Romans that God's "*eternal power and divine nature have been clearly perceived ever since the creation of the world*" so we are "*without excuse*." In other words, every dog will have his day. But we work hard to keep the day at bay so that we may continue in sin. So, we flee God.

I wish it weren't this way. I can always tell when I meet a person at the store who hasn't been to church in awhile. I see them on aisle 6 and they duck down aisle 7. I'll be honest, it is usually late or my day off and I'm not really interested in being part of any scene about why they haven't been to church. I just want to get my grape nuts and go home. But inevitably we meet on aisle 8. Then come the apologies and the talk of being really busy. But usually the absence has to do with s-e-x. I'm thinking grace, but they are attributing to me judgment. And so they flee from God. Or at least they flee from church. As St. Augustine famously said, "*Lord, give me chastity and continency – but not yet!*"

The other main reason why we've "*fled him down the arches of the years*" is that deep down we know that if we meet God face to face our game is up. We flee Him because He says strange and hard things like, "*anyone of you who does not renounce all he has cannot be my disciple*." That is just what Jesus says right before he tells the stories in today's gospel.

To renounce all you have is to confess that you are right there among the sinners, and that what you thought about offering God really isn't much anyway, and you've really made quite a mess of trying to run your own ship. To renounce all you have is to raise the white flag on the entire project of your own life – your hopes and dreams and aspirations, and to say to God "O.K. not my will, but thy will be done."

Who really wants to do that? We might play at it once in a while, but who really wants give over all control? If you're like me, you'll raise the flag in a moment of need and then quickly lower it again when the coast is clear. Nobody really wants to keep the white flag waving in the gusts of our lives? So we flee Him down our many labyrinthine ways, because if the strong feet following after catch up to us, then we are no longer our own masters and we may be asked to do things we might find difficult or inconvenient.

A friend got a call out of the blue from a former classmate at UVA. He hadn't heard from this guy since they graduated 5 years ago. The guy called because he'd had a come to Jesus experience and needed to clear his conscience. He called to confess that he had cheated off my friends test 7 years ago, had reported himself to the UVA Honor Committee and was waiting to see if his diploma would be rescinded. These are the kinds of things that happen when one renounces all he has. Fortunately, he eventually found out that he was outside the statute of limitations and could keep his diploma. But really, isn't it much less hassle to flee God!?

We flee, but God follows after. Jesus tells two stories about God following after. The first story is about a guy who's got 100 sheep. One bolts. So he leaves the 99 and hightails it after the stray. Now, sheep are sheep. They all look the same to me. I can't imagine even noticing that 1 sheep has left the fold when there are 99 others who look just like it. But the guy who cares for the sheep notices. And he worries. And he follows after. And he finds the sheep and puts it on his shoulder and carries it home and has a party.

The second story is about a woman who turns her house upside down in search of a lost coin. Money can't flee on it's own – or maybe it can! But, in any case, the coin is lost, the woman notices, worries, searches, finds, and then throws a party.

We flee God, but God follows after. It's such a good thing too, because we are never our own masters anyway. The sin that we think we are enjoying is actually mastering us and if the truth were told, destroying us bit by bit. And what or whom are we really afraid of? There is no hint of lecture when the man finds his sheep. "You bad sheep, see what you've put me through!!" Who would be afraid of being picked up, carried like a child on broad shoulders, and then being the special guest at a happy party? Yes, you renounce all you have. But, there is no sweeter freedom than white flag flapping in the breeze.

We flee, but God follows after. Hallelujah. *"For isn't it strange – and marvelous – that somehow the more we plead with him to go away the more surely he moves in upon us? The more we try to get rid of him, the more tightly he closes in with majestic constancy? We tried to get rid of him once and for all by nailing him to a cross. We sealed him in a tomb, but the stone was rolled away, and he came back to say 'shalom'."* (Gerhard Forde)

Amen.