

Today I'm starting a preaching series on "The Gospel and the Golden Age of Cinema." I'll be preaching one or occasionally two sermons per month for the next 15 months focused on classic Hollywood movies from the 1930s, 40s, and 50s. Today I'm zeroing in on the 1933 classic, *The Invisible Man*, which is loosely based on the 1897 classic science-fiction novel of the same name by H.G. Wells.

3 of the 4 top members of the cast ended up in later famous movies. Anyone who knows Rocky Horror knows that "Claude Rains was the Invisible Man." A stage actor, this was Claude Rains's big movie debut, though he ironically wasn't seen clearly until the final few moments. His biggest roles came later—he would eventually be nominated 4 times for the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor, including my favorite Claude Rains role, Capt. Louis Renault in *Casablanca*.

Also in *The Invisible Man*, Henry Travers played Claude Rains's mentor, Dr. Cranley. Travers would be best known for his role as Angel 2nd class Clarence Odbody in the 1946 Christmas classic, *It's a Wonderful Life*.

A 23-year-old Gloria Stuart played the young ingénue, Flora Cranley, but she would have to wait more than 6 decades longer for her biggest Hollywood role. It would be 64 years later that Gloria Stuart was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress. She appeared in what was at that time the highest grossing movie of all time, 1997's epic *Titanic*. At age 87, Gloria Stuart played a 101-year-old Rose Dewitt Dawson, splitting the role with Kate Winslet who played the 17-year-old version.

This talented cast is complemented by director James Whale, who had already had great success with *Frankenstein*, and would later direct *The Bride of Frankenstein* and the film version of the classic musical, *Show Boat*. James Whale would later be the subject of a movie biography, 1998's *Gods and Monsters*. In that film, Sir Ian McKellen would be nominated for an Academy Award for portraying James Whale.

On top of all these talented individuals, *The Invisible Man* also features what at the time were absolutely cutting-edge special effects. But the effects, as wonderful as they are, don't drive the story.

Instead, the movie opens with a stranger entering a pub in a remote village, swathed in bandages, and wearing dark goggles. He wants to rent lodgings. We will later learn that he is Claude Rains playing Dr. Jack Griffin who has been conducting chemistry experiments related to invisibility. He has succeeded all too well. He has turned himself invisible, and he can't figure out a way to reverse the process. He's trying to hole up in his room, undisturbed, so that he can engage in research to become visible again. But no matter what he tries, it's to no avail. And he keeps getting interrupted which frustrates him even more. Eventually in desperation he cries out, "There must be a way back. God knows there's a way back. If only they'd leave me alone."

And that's a clue to one of the great overarching themes of the movie. The titular Invisible Man is isolating himself from society.

And that isolation, coupled with his inability to reverse his invisibility, coupled with some nasty side effects of the chemicals his using, begin to drive him further and further into madness.

He begins to use his invisibility to play some relatively harmless pranks on people. But the pranks become more serious, and eventually lead to murder, and then more murders. And as he is able to get away with it, the invisible Dr. Griffin develops megalomania. He is cutting himself off from the world, and yet he also wants to use his power to dominate the world.

And though you can't see Claude Rains's face, you can hear his superb voice brilliantly conveying Dr. Griffin's increasing insanity.

At one point he has a wonderful soliloquy. He says,  
"Suddenly I realized the power that I held. The power to rule, to make the world grovel at my feet."

And a few moments later he continues,  
"Power I said, power to walk into the gold vaults of the nations, into the secrets of kings, into the Holy of Holies. Power to make multitudes run, squealing in terror at the touch of my little invisible finger."

Dr. Griffin is hellbent on using his invisibility to gain power in all of its forms: political, economic, religious, and sexual. He is cut off and isolated from his community. Yet he wants to dominate that community nonetheless.

In our Gospel lesson today, we see a very different sort of invisible man. In chapter 10 of Mark, Jesus is passing through Jericho on the way to Jerusalem. In fact, the next verse after our Gospel lesson is Jesus arriving in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, to begin the final act of his ministry, the final 6 days of his life, his Passion and Crucifixion and Death.

But before Jesus gets to Jerusalem, he's passing through Jericho, a day's journey away. And he meets an invisible man. Bartimaeus, a blind beggar is sitting by the side of the road. Bartimaeus is one of those invisible sorts, the kind of people others want to ignore. The others in Jericho want to pretend not to see him. Bartimaeus himself is blind. But his neighbors also turn a blind eye to him.

And though Bartimaeus cannot see, he hears that Jesus is approaching. And he shouts out,

"Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"<sup>1</sup>

The rest of the crowd tries to shut him down and shut him up. They sternly order him to be quiet. They want him to remain inaudible as well as invisible. But Bartimaeus shouts all the louder, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mk 10:47

<sup>2</sup> Mk 10:48

Bartimaeus is calling Jesus a King. He's the only person in the entire Gospel of Mark who uses the royal term "Son of David" for Jesus. In a real way, blind Bartimaeus is the only one in Mark who sees Jesus for who he is, the true king.

And Jesus sees Bartimaeus. Bartimaeus not invisible to Jesus. Jesus stops in his tracks and says, "Call him here."<sup>3</sup>

And when Bartimaeus hears that Jesus is calling for him, Mark says that Bartimaeus throws off his cloak, springs up and comes to Jesus.

This is not a throwaway line. The cloak would have been what Bartimaeus would have spread on the ground to sit on to beg, and to collect the coins that people might throw his way. But apparently his old cloak, this symbol of his old begging life is now excess baggage. When Jesus calls, Bartimaeus leaves his cloak behind.

Jesus asks, "What do you want me to do for you?"

Bartimaeus replies, "My teacher, let me see again."

And Jesus says, "Go; your faith has made you well."

And Mark adds, "Immediately (Bartimaeus) regained his sight and followed (Jesus) on the way."<sup>4</sup>

Jesus healed Bartimaeus and said "Go."

But Bartimaeus chose instead to follow Jesus, even though he was following him to Jerusalem.

Bartimaeus began as an invisible man. He ends up as a disciple. Instead of sitting alongside the road, he is now on the road with Jesus.

However, in the 1933 movie, the Invisible Man is no disciple. He goes on a murderous rampage, eventually killing hundreds of people.

Eventually the police are able to surround the building where's he's hiding. And the chief detective who is pursuing him notices footprints being made in the snow by unseen feet and takes his shot, which brings down the Invisible Man. As he lays dying in the hospital, Griffin tells his fiancée, Flora, "I meddled in things that man must leave alone."

And an instant after he dies, his body becomes visible again. Only death can bring healing to the Invisible Man.

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<sup>3</sup> Mk 10:49

<sup>4</sup> Mk 10:51-52

By contrast, Jesus brings new life and light and sight to the previously invisible and blind Bartimaeus.

One invisible man finds isolation and madness.  
The other invisible man finds community and wholeness.

Like Jesus, may we keep our eyes open to those others regard as invisible.

Like Bartimaeus, may we seek Jesus as our source of life and light. And may we follow him on the way.