

## **Journey Without Luggage**

### 3 – Following Jesus for Life

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

Mark 3:13-19, 6:7-13

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Ordination and Installation of Officers Sunday

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You wonder whether Delta Airlines had a hand in this instruction, “take nothing with you for your journey except one small handbag that will fit over your seat or else pay dearly for extra luggage stowed below.” Jesus sends his disciples out on mission, their first experience of doing his work on their own. Two by two they are sent out to towns and villages throughout Galilee to do the healing work he had been teaching them. But oddly he says, “Do not take a lot of stuff along. Not even the basics. You are going to be on the move, so nothing more than the barest minimal. No bread, no bag, no money. Just wear sandals and one not two tunics. You will have to depend on the hospitality of those you encounter for each day’s provision. Oh, but there is one thing you can take, a staff.” That staff may have been for walking along the hard rocky roads they will travel. More likely though it is the staff of a shepherd who uses it to guide and direct his wayward sheep.

These disciples, who have been with Jesus for some boot camp initial training, ever since he called them from their everyday lives in Galilee as fishermen and tax collectors and common laborers are now sent forth in his name and with his authority. They are sent out to get some initial mission experience as his representatives, a summer job – if you will, and they must travel lean. No extra shirts, no jackets, not even any money to get them a room at an inn. How impractical can you get? Take just yourselves and enough clothing on so you do not get arrested for indecency. Oh and one thing more, along with that staff, go with the authority of my Spirit. Now there’s something. They go in his name, under his authority. Well, they take Jesus at his word, and head out, empowered by his Spirit, and amazing ministry takes place. Their first experience of exercising ministry in his name and by his authority is exhilarating. “They went out and preached that people should repent. They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them.”

## I

Jesus has been on the move about Galilee since he came out on the other side of his baptism and temptation. He began to preach all around the region different variations on the same stump speech, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”<sup>1</sup> Something is up and now is the time to turn your life around and wake up to God’s presence in your midst. Great crowds are being drawn to him, he has a magnetic appeal.

Once he has his basic message down of repentance, forgiveness of sins, and new life through his name, his very next priority is to call together a group of disciples, followers who will be with him, learn his teachings, experience his presence, then go forth in his name and do the things he has done. He walks along the shore of the lake and calls forth fishermen from their nets. He stops at the little stands in the marketplace and amid vendors selling vegetables and fruits, there in the middle of

them, is the booth of a tax collector, there for convenience of paying Caesar, like banks have branches these days in grocery stores. Jesus calls a tax collector too. Twelve of them in all.

And then, somewhere between healing a leper and a paralytic and a man with a withered hand and the sick mother-in-law of Simon Peter, (yes some of the disciples were married), somewhere between all that healing and teaching he takes them up on the mountaintop. Important God encounters always seem to happen up on the mountaintop, and there he officially appoints his twelve disciples, that is followers yes, but also apostles, that is those sent out to proclaim the good news and have authority over demons. It is a sort of ordination and installation service. And the roster is read: Simon, who will get a new name, Peter, James the son of Zebedee, John the brother of James. He got a new name too, Boanerges, or Sons of Thunder, meaning strong loud one. And then Andrew, Simon's brother, Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus, and Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the betrayer.

These twelve make up Jesus' team. These are the inner circle. These are the unlikely first generation leaders he will train through being with them night and day so that they can learn his teaching and take in his values and exercise his power. They are to be with him and to be sent out. These are the ones who have responded immediately to his call to leave their nets and their tax books and follow him. "Follow me and I will make you fish for people," he says. They come immediately. They come without condition.

Others we hear about are invited later on and make excuses, no thanks - land to tend to, parents to bury. That excuse, by the way, implies not the immediate duty of lovingly laying aside ones parents in decent respectful burial, but that the parents are not even dead. The objector is not about to step out and do anything risky until the burial is taken care of, whenever that happens, and more to the point, the inheritance is in hand, that is, until financial security is assured. Still others want to have a series of farewell parties like when you graduate from high school. But Jesus calls followers who are ready then and there to take him at his word and follow.<sup>ii</sup> These twelve do and they go with him.

## II

He has called them to come without condition. Now he calls them to go without back-up. No luggage. No extra coat. No change of underwear. Just the clothing on your back, one layer no more, and go. Do you think Nick Saban would have sent his team down to New Orleans with such instructions? Actually maybe he did because the victory in the Big Easy came because of something those Alabama players had inside them and not because of their external gear. Still it is a pretty jarring, pretty scary way to be sent out.

Jesus is teaching his representatives the source of their effectiveness. It is not in their clothing, not in their food, not in a nice bank account, not in a fancy house. "I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? ... But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."<sup>iii</sup> That is what he has told them.

Jesus is presenting himself to them as the new Israel. And even as the old Israel had to learn to depend on God in the wilderness for their daily bread, manna in the morning, quail in the evening

that God alone provided, so these, Jesus' apostles must learn to depend wholly on him as they undertake his mission.

And so they go and so they do. They head out in his name and by his authority, luggage free, trusting him to work through them. They take him at his word, and they go, and they experience an amazing season of ministry. Things are really popping. They are preaching up a storm and the response is tremendous.

But over time it is not so easy. I remember when I first went off to seminary, responding to a call from Jesus Christ to be part of his work of bringing light to dark places. I arrived solo at Princeton Seminary in my Oldsmobile Delta 88 after a year of working in Washington, D.C. with a bit of luggage and a few books in a rooftop carrier. That was all. Three years later Gayle and I together went to Tulsa to begin ministry in our first church. Our household goods fit into the front third of the moving van the church provided for us. I thought that was pretty neat, this church wanted us so much they were even going to move us out there to be with them.

Four years later, when we answered the call to go to Monroe, Louisiana, we filled up nearly a full moving van and had two 18 month olds in car seats in the back of our Datsun hatchback. Again, the church took care of the move. Seven years after that, with yet a third little one along, our little princess, we filled a complete moving van front to back. To ease the sting for our second grade 7 year old boys who thought the world was coming to an end because they were moving to Kentucky, I even took down board by board the three level fort I had built with them in the back yard in Louisiana and put it in the van too. Got to have all our creature comforts, you know! That moving van blew four tires in route, I was told. The movers had saved for last placing my growing collection of books from the church study into the back of the van, little suspecting what they were getting into weight wise. Again the church took care of the bill – by now I understood this was something the Presbytery required.

Eight years after that we arrived here in Birmingham, stuff now filling not one but one and a half moving vans, and on top of that I brought some books in a u haul myself, tied to the back of our loaded Ford Econoline Van. Catherine really “loved” arriving as a seventh grader at Mountain Brook Jr. High in a Ford Econoline Van. (“Daddy please, please, drop me off two blocks from school!) Stuff – We think we need so much, but it weighs us down.

You get the picture. We start out with the clothing on our back and little more. But gradually the luggage accumulates things we need, just have to have. And it is not that the stuff is necessarily bad. Just distracting. Houses and furniture and families, yes families too, these can deter us from our primary focus on God. And as these build up we have to take time to run it back the other way, pare down, simplify, let some things go, give some things away – so we can do what we are called to do, so we can hear God's voice and do God's work.

The disciples are sent as apostles and must be dependent on these to whom and with whom they minister and on God. For the most part they experience a warm reception. Their ministry is welcomed. Their needs are met. But Jesus hints it will not always be so. “If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.” This reflected a tradition for the Jews when they had been among Gentiles who did not follow the Law, and when they left them they were to shake the dust off. Jesus tells his

representatives – joyfully and expectantly go and declare the Good News and expect a good response. Expect the Gospel to accomplish its work. But when it doesn't, when people say no, and will not give you a hearing after you have done all you know to do, just shake the dust off and go on. These apostles then enter this amazing ministry season.

But glance ahead at the next story Mark tells. Immediately after this fantastic flourishing of ministry, Mark gives us an uncharacteristically detailed account of the death of John the Baptist, who gets his head chopped off and presented to Herod's guests on a platter. Which story brings to a screeching halt the previous success? It is like the apostles are being warned that this is where you may end up, that ministry will, more often than not, be less like winning the national championship and more like hanging on a cross.

### III

Today we are going to the mountain top, anointing and commissioning ordaining and installing eight new elders and six new deacons and one new trustee to go forth in the authority of Jesus among us. We are praying over them, laying hands on them, and asking God to give them the Spirit's anointing for the task of ministry they have been called and equipped to undertake. And I have to tell you, and you know, these are remarkably gifted people who know a lot about our faith tradition, and more than know a lot, they have been growing a lot in their faith and their prayer life, and are expecting God to act. This Gospel is asking them and is asking us to step out, leave our luggage behind and trust God will provide. And that is hard. That is scary, especially in the tailwinds of a recession.

Bishop Will Willimon, who was our preacher last week, reflected on the night of his ordination. He called it,

“one of the most humbling experiences of my life. Looking out over the gathered congregation, I was suddenly overwhelmed by the faces of the people whom I would serve as pastor. I caught a vision of all my inadequacies and limitations, all the things I didn't know and couldn't do well. How could any merely human being undertake such a mission?”

Then, in the ancient rite of ordination, when the Bishop laid hands on my head, he prayed the ancient prayer, *Veni Creator Spiritus*, ‘Come Holy Spirit.’ I realized that the church had no intention of sending me out alone. I would be given the gift of the Holy Spirit to help me do the ministry to which I was called. I would not have to be a pastor by myself.”

Nor an elder, nor a deacon, nor a trustee. God's Spirit was there with the disciples, even as God's spirit is here with us, giving us what we need, all we need, for the tasks before us in our time and place. Remember that when you are in a tight spot. As Paul writes the Philippians, “I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.”<sup>iv</sup> New officers, Church, everyone here, you can count on him. Come without

condition. Go without back-up. No luggage. Expect exhilaration, anticipate opposition. Yet know the spirit of Jesus Christ is at work within you. To Him be all honor and praise. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Mark 1:14-15

<sup>ii</sup> Luke 9:57-62

<sup>iii</sup> Matthew 6:25, 33

<sup>iv</sup> Phil. 1:6