

“Traveling LIGHT”

Mark 6:6b-13 ¹

Some of you may know the author Bill Bryson. A New Englander who has spent about half his life in England, Bill is an amazing storyteller. While his language is somewhat “salty,” his ability to turn a phrase almost always makes me smile.

One of his books, *A Walk in the Woods*,² is one of the most hilarious books I’ve ever read. I literally laughed until I cried from nearly the beginning to the end. *A Walk in the Woods* is Bill’s account of his ill-fated attempt to walk the Appalachian Trail with an old friend, neither of whom was in proper physical shape, and neither of whom had any idea of what they were getting into.

One memorable scene early in their trek comes when Bill’s companion, Katz, who is extremely rotund and who has brought “everything but the kitchen sink” for their adventure, begins throwing his gear over this cliff and that, trying to lighten his load toward what it should have been in the first place.

That unfortunately reminds me a great deal of myself. Our son, Nathan, lived in Vail, Colorado for a number of years, and on one occasion, he and I went backpacking and camping for ten days in the high country.

I’m afraid I had more in common with Bill’s friend Katz than I’d like to admit; and Nathan took a great many pictures of “Dad lying down trying to get his breath and rest his legs.” The fact of the matter is that people who take a lot of fancy or extra stuff on backpacking adventures are seriously confused about the nature of the task.

I did better during Desert Storm—the first Iraq War—back in 1990-1991. I was in much better shape, and I understood that, were I to be delivered to the front lines as a Chaplain (the unit I belonged to was in the desert), I would likely be dropped out of a helicopter with just a pack on my back. And this Bible and a small communion kit were all the “Chaplain’s Gear” that was going with me into that helicopter.³

Packing for adventure is my point, and I invite you to travel with me now west of Iraq to Israel, and back in time to the first century. When we last saw Jesus in the Gospel of Mark, His neighbors and friends in Nazareth had rejected Him as God’s Prophet and Messiah, but He was neither dejected nor defeated by this rejection.

Jesus began to travel from village to village in Galilee, preaching, teaching, and healing. And in our text for today, Jesus began sending His twelve Disciples out into the villages, two by two, to do the same thing.

I had a similar experience during the summer of 2006, when I spent ten days doing evangelism and church planting in the hinterlands of Malawi. We literally walked all day long

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on April 23, 2017. Parallel passages are Matthew 10:1-14 and Luke 9:1-5.

Sources for this sermon include: Barclay, William, “The Gospel of Mark,” *The Daily Study Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954); Culpeper, Alan, “Mark,” *The Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2007); Garland, David E. “Mark,” *The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996); Lane, William, “The Gospel According to Mark,” *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974); Turlington, Henry, “Mark,” *The Broadman Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman, 1969); Wessell, Walter, “Mark,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Volume 8: Matthew, Mark, Luke. Digital Version.

² Bill Bryson, *A Walk in the Woods: Rediscovering America on the Appalachian Trail* (Anchor, 2006).

³ Thankfully, I was not called into combat.

through grain fields, from one family compound to the next, from one village to the next, telling the story of Jesus. And I frequently thought to myself, “This is just like the Disciples in the first century!” I’ll come back to that in a bit.

Jesus’ original invitation and call to the Twelve had been that “I will make you fishers of men” (Mark 1:17). He has now been teaching them for a while. They have seen some amazing miracles already, and they have watched Jesus at work and learned much from Him.

And now, rather like “student teaching,” Jesus sent them out to try their hands at the work themselves. As many of us know from similar experiences, once we have “been in the trenches” ourselves and then return to our own teachers, there is a new urgency and depth to our desire for learning. That’s what was going on here, too.

Jesus sent the Twelve out in pairs—perhaps in the pairs listed in Matthew 10:2-4—for a number of reasons.⁴ We worked in pairs or trios in Malawi, too, for similar reasons.

For one thing, the Mosaic Law had long provided for “two witnesses” to establish the truth of any claim.⁵ Traveling in pairs was also safer than traveling alone (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12); and it’s just more encouraging to have someone with whom to journey, talk, and pray.⁶

We’re also told that Jesus invested the Twelve with His own authority, both to preach and to heal and to cast out evil spirits. Jesus sent them out as His own representatives, to teach what He taught and to work by His power. He sent them out with divine authority to call people to repentance. The Twelve did not go out with a tentative or a hypothetical message. They were sent to say, “Thus says the Lord!”

Now in the pre-operation briefing for such a mission, we might have expected Jesus to give detailed instructions about proper methods for healing, proper outlines for preaching, and the most effective approaches to exorcism . . . but we see none of this. Instead, Jesus seems to have only told the Disciples what NOT to take with them.

While Jesus allowed them to take a staff (a walking stick) and sandals, they were to take no provisions, no food, no beggar’s bag, no money whatsoever, and no change of clothing.⁷ This was not going to be first-class travel—at least not in the ordinary sense. Jesus intended that the Twelve should trust absolutely in God’s provision for their needs, that they should live lives consistent with the urgency of their message, and that they would cultivate community—which is the real essence of God’s Kingdom—by depending on hospitality wherever they went.

While Jesus Himself had no place of His own in which to lay His head (Luke 9:58), He also had nourishment from “*a kind of food that you know nothing about*” (John 4:32-34). Jesus knew, and He wanted His disciples to discover, that the world’s resources do not nourish the soul. Only obedience to God’s purposes does that. Persons who seek ease and comfort and financial security and personal ambition may get all those things, but they will be hungry still.

⁴ Simon and Andrew; James and John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew; James and Thaddaeus; Simon and Judas.

⁵ Numbers 35:30; Deuteronomy 17:6, 19:15

⁶ The early Church continued this practice: Peter and John (Acts 8:14); Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:2; 1 Corinthians 9:6, 15:36-40; Barnabas and Mark (Acts 15:39); Paul and Silas (Acts 16:25, 17:3, 10); Paul and Timothy (Acts 16:3).

⁷ In Matthew and Luke, they were not even allowed staff or sandals (Matthew 10:9-10; Luke 9:3, 10:4).

And today, as then, God's message will not be taken seriously if it is borne by charlatans who claim to bring an urgent message of salvation while it is abundantly clear that what they really want is to secure their own ease at others' expense. And today, as then, the more of the world's stuff we have, the more timid and hesitant our speaking for God tends to be. This snare affects disciples both famous and unknown. The world's goods are not evil in themselves, *but they are dangerous*, and we do well to hold them lightly.

Jesus also told the Twelve to accept the first hospitality offered them and to remain in that house so long as they were in that town. Even today, hospitality is regarded as a sacred duty in that part of the world, and when a stranger entered a village, it was not his duty to search for hospitality—it was the duty of the village to offer it.

Jesus' instructions ensured that the first family to offer hospitality would not be humiliated by the Disciples' leaving for better quarters, should they find any. Indeed, some of the holiest experiences of my own missionary efforts over the years have taken place in humble homes where the roaches had free reign after dark and where the food was of a sort I would normally have shunned. It was often in such houses that God's Spirit was also most welcome and most powerful.

Jesus also made it clear to the Twelve that they would not always find themselves welcome, even as He Himself was not. Those who do the work of prophets frequently find themselves with "a prophet's reward," and John the Baptist's beheading will be the next thing Mark records.

If they came to a place that would not receive them, Jesus told the Twelve to "*shake the dust from your feet as you leave to show that you have abandoned those people to their fate*" (Mark 6:11). This was actually a well-known practice among the Jews, who, when returning to Israel from Gentile lands, carefully removed the dust of the alien lands from their feet and clothing, separating themselves from the pollution of those lands and from what they expected and hoped would be their ultimate judgment.

It is still the case as we sit here this morning that as many people as possible must hear the Good News and have opportunity to respond to it. I have struggled myself for years with the question, "What right does anyone have to hear the Gospel *twice*, when so many have never heard it *once*?" And I don't have a satisfactory answer to that question.

When we were in Malawi, the hearts of the people were unusually, amazingly, open to Jesus. One day, we went one day to the village of Mlala, where we found the men of the village making bricks, while the women and children sat in the shade nearby. My South African partner, Wendy, shared the Gospel with the women, and many received Jesus as their Savior. When she had finished, our Malawian hosts began to lead us away, and I protested that we had not spoken to the men. "They do not want to hear about Jesus," Cleanily, our host, replied. "We have shaken the dust off our feet, and we move on." It was a sobering moment indeed.

The message Jesus gave to the Twelve was the same message we brought to Malawi, and it is the same message we have today: "*The time promised by God has come at last! The Kingdom of God is near! Repent of your sins and believe the Good News!*" (Mark 1:15).

Now as we saw in Mlala, the call to repentance is frequently not a particularly welcome one. The call to repent is disturbing, because to repent means to change one's mind, and then to change one's actions to conform to that change of mind. Repentance has to do with changing our minds, hearts, and actions, and *repentance always begins with the painful realization that the way we were going was both mistaken and wrong*.

Repentance has to do with “doing a 180.” Repentance has to do with a complete reversal of the direction and priorities of our lives, and that is why so many people reject it.

The reversal of repentance is not necessarily a turning from robbery, theft, murder, addiction, or adultery. For many of us, the reversal is from a life that is selfish, demanding, inconsiderate, small, and mean-spirited. Repentance is not about having some warm feeling in a church service. Repentance is a revolutionary thing, and that is why it is so often refused.

But the Good News of salvation in Jesus is so absolutely transforming that for those who understand what is being offered, ***“it is like a treasure that a man discovered hidden in a field. In his excitement, he hid it again and sold everything he owned to get enough money to buy that field”*** (Matthew 13:44).

When we came to the village of Dema in Malawi, Cleanly met the leader of the village and told him why we had come. When the man understood, he pointed to a man asleep on the ground and said, “I must awaken my brother.” His brother had been up all night fishing on Lake Malawi in a dugout canoe.

As usually happened, many in that village received Jesus that day, and the fisherman said, with tears in his eyes, *“I have prayed that someone would come to tell us about God.”* And I still have goose-bumps every time I tell that story.

Avery Willis has noted that “There are only two reasons why people are lost: first, they have never adequately heard the message of God’s salvation; or second, they have heard it and rejected it. We cannot do much about the second reason, but it is our obligation to eliminate the first.”

My friends, just as was the case in long-ago Galilee, every person has a right to hear the Good News effectively presented at least once in their lives. We who know Jesus have the Greatest News in the world, and sharing it is the greatest kindness we can show to anyone.

It is not our job to press for a decision or to convict others of their need for Jesus. That is the work of God’s Spirit (John 16:7-8). We who follow Jesus just report what we have experienced and what has happened to us. We introduce others to Jesus and invite them closer to Him.

Nor is it always necessary for us to go somewhere exotic or far away to do this work. Jesus didn’t send the Twelve far away at first. He sent them to the villages of Galilee, which would be like sending us to Columbia and to the towns nearby.

Jesus’ original invitation to the Twelve was to become “fishers of men” (Mark 1:17). And our “witnessing” is called “fishing” for a reason. If you’re going to catch fish in a lake or stream, you have to know what sort of fish you’re after. You have to go where they go and be there when they’re there. You have to offer them what they’ll eat; and you have to be patient. Each of these principles applies to “fishing for people,” too.

In order to become fishers of people, you and I must first of all know the Lord Jesus ourselves. We must be people who have ourselves repented, who have committed ourselves fully and completely to the Way of Jesus, and who live lives that, while less than perfect, are examples of what God-transformed lives look like. We must be growing in our love for and our obedience to Jesus and His Way every day of our lives. That’s the essential starting point, and there is no other.

Once our own lives have begun to be transformed by the power of God's indwelling Spirit, the next step in becoming fishers of people is to "define our pond." You've seen this diagram before. Its circles define the boundaries of the "pond" in which God calls you to "fish," beginning with the persons closest to you and moving outward toward divine appointments with persons you may not yet know.

Happily, the "circles" of our lives overlap, and if every follower of Jesus is diligently at work within our own "concentric circles," that will go a long way toward sharing the Good News with the world. And some of you will have recognized by now that the title of this sermon is actually a double entendre.

We are to "travel light" as those early disciples did, not becoming encumbered with the stuff of the world, though we receive and use that stuff gratefully and gladly. But we are also to be "traveling LIGHT," carrying the Good News of Jesus to others wherever we go. Jesus told us, "*You are the **light** of the world*" (Matthew 5:14). "*I have made you a **light** for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth*" (Acts 13:47).

My friend, there are persons in this world who only you will be able to reach, because of where you live, because of who you are—because of who God has made you to be. So I urge you to begin even now to ask the Holy Spirit to make you aware of these persons.

The Holy Spirit is your Holy Radar. Ask God to help you to recognize these people to whom you are sent, to understand how to befriend them and what words to use so that the Kingdom comes **where you are** as it is in heaven.

We have work to do. Let's carry the Light!