Sunday, January 26, 1997
REPACKING YOUR BAGS
Mark 1:14-20

There's a worn-out view of adulthood that is still too present in our culture — the view that the person you are at mid-life is the person you will be for the rest of your life.

What is mid-life? It's more a state of mind than a set number of years. There are those who mentally reach mid-life at age 30, and others at age 45, 50, or more.

Mid-life is that point in your journey when you begin to reflect on who you are and why. You begin to examine what you have and all you've achieved and ask, "Where do I go from here?"

For some, mid-life is also the time when you become aware that you are carrying too much baggage from the past but don't know how to lighten the load. It's difficult because the same burdens that now weigh you down are the very ones that have sustained you in your life thus far. Your job, your home, your loyalties, and your goals have given your life fullness, but at the same time, they often seem more than you can bear. You begin to wonder if all you have packed into your life has left any room for truly living. Furthermore, is what you're carrying with you what you will need for the rest of your journey?

What do you do? One of the most helpful metaphors for me is to remember that there are points or crossroads in your life's journey when you have to unpack and then repack your bags.

Unpacking means taking a long, hard look at what you're carrying and why. It means asking yourself whether your possessions and responsibilities, your fears, and your dreams are still helping to move you forward so that you are continuing to grow, or if they are dragging you down. It means re-evaluating the goals in your life to determine whether they are good ones leading you in the right direction or bad ones leading you off course.

I believe that when Andrew and Simon met Jesus for the first time, they were at the mid-life stage in their journeys and were beginning to ask such questions. They were ready to unpack and repack their bags. The account of this meeting in the Gospel of Mark is brief, but remember, it is only a condensed report of what happened. That's how Mark's Gospel is all the way through — everything happens in a hurry. Mark gives very few details. He only gives us brief summaries of what took place, which allows us to use our imaginations to fill in the gaps.

Listen to several verses again: "As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea — for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, 'Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.' And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James, son of Zebedee, and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called to them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him."

That's quick and very efficient recruiting, if it happened that suddenly. But as I said earlier, Mark gives us a highly condensed version of the story. In fact, the writer of Mark's Gospel loves to use the word "immediately." It's used 35 times in his short Gospel. The Gospel of John uses the word only twice, Matthew 14 times, and Luke 12 times. Remember, too, that most

Biblical scholars believe both Matthew and Luke had the Gospel of Mark when they wrote theirs, but they slowed things down in telling their versions of the story.

Whether or not these two sets of brothers — Simon and Andrew, James and John — had ever met Jesus before this, we do not know. Nor do we know if they made their decision to leave the fishing business as suddenly as Mark describes. Maybe they had been considering it for some time but had not found anything else that attracted them. We do know that, at this point in their lives, because of Jesus' invitation, they were willing to unpack and repack their bags for their life's journey.

The important point for us today as we seek to follow the way of Jesus is this: what can we learn from this story about our own life decisions — not only mid-life, but early life and late life — about what to unpack and what to repack for our life's journey?

Perhaps a story about a man named Richard will help. Richard was leading a group of 12 mid-life adventurers on a safari in East Africa. At the end of their first day's walk, they came to their evening destination, a small Maasai village. They would camp there for the night before continuing their backpacking hike in the morning.

Their guide the next day was to be the chief of the village, a tall, lean Maasai man named Koyie. He spoke English fluently, having been educated at a missionary school. Koyie was gregarious and witty, with the uncanny ability to move easily between the world of the tourist group and that of his own culture.

The next morning, the group of 12, with Koyie as their guide, continued the journey. Richard, who was responsible for the group, was wearing a brand-new backpack. It was one of those high-tech, ultralight models designed for maximum cargo-carrying efficiency, covered with snaps, clasps, and zippers, full of pockets and pouches, compartments inside compartments, and stuffed with all kinds of items.

As they walked along, Koyie kept glancing at Richard's overstuffed backpack. That evening, as the group set up camp for the night, Richard offered to show Koyie his backpack and what he had in it. He wanted to impress the village chief with how carefully he had packed for the journey.

With pride, he laid it on the ground, unzipped the many zippers, and unsnapped pockets, producing all sorts of strange and wonderful items — eating utensils, cutting devices, digging tools, direction finders, clothing, medical supplies, and more. When it was all spread out, Richard looked at Koyie for his reaction. Koyie seemed amused but silent. Finally, after several minutes of surveying everything, Koyie turned and asked, "Does all this make you happy?"

Richard was stunned. There was something very powerful about Koyie's question. His words hit at the heart of Richard's deepest values. Richard couldn't answer the question that evening, and for weeks afterward, he thought about it.

Equally important, Koyie's question got Richard not only to think about what he was carrying on the backpacking trip but through his entire life.

That evening, Richard and Koyie sat around the fire and talked late into the night. Mentally, Richard began going through all that he had packed for the trip, trying to decide if it did make him happy. He discovered that in the process, he was clarifying the core values of his life.

Some of the things he was carrying did add to his happiness, but many of them didn't — at least not in any way that made sense to be dragging them along. So, as he repacked, he set those things aside and eventually gave them to the local villagers. He went the rest of the journey without them. His load was much lighter, and he was happier for having repacked his bags.

Maybe some of you are carrying things on your life's journey that are weighing you down, things that are no longer useful. We're not only talking about material things. You might be carrying patterns of behavior that have helped you get where you are but are not helping you get where you want to be.

You might be carrying long-established habits that are not adding something to your life but are taking something away. You could be carrying grudges or resentments that weigh you down and need to be unpacked and left behind.

There are people who feel weighed down by responsibilities, financial commitments, and work demands they have willingly taken on. They are convinced they can't possibly unpack their bags because other people are depending on them to carry the load. Sometimes that's true. But at other times, if they discuss it with their loved ones, it turns out they are carrying far more than they need, for reasons that don't exist. They've simply never asked their families, friends, or partners for permission to lighten their load. More importantly, they've never asked themselves.

It takes courage to look at what you're carrying — and even more to consider leaving some things behind. It's much easier to live with what we have, to hang on to it, and then complain about it.

You could even be carrying a religious faith that is weighing you down more than it is lifting you up and giving you the energy to live a joyful life. Maybe it needs to be unpacked and then repacked. One way to evaluate your religious faith is to ask: Does it help me broaden my vision, or does it narrow and limit my vision? Does it add energy and joy to my life, or is it like a heavy load I would rather not carry?

Remember, Jesus said, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:28-30).

When Jesus invited Simon and Andrew, James, and John to follow him, it meant they had to unpack and then repack their bags to accept the invitation. I'm convinced they might have been fearful at first, but as they followed Jesus, they never regretted that decision.

There's one more point that comes from this story. In the process of unpacking and repacking and then following the way of Jesus, Simon, Andrew, James, and John discovered new things about themselves that they were previously unaware of. Or, to put it another way, Jesus saw in them possibilities they had not seen in themselves, but now they could see.

When Jesus invited them to become his followers, this was no casual invitation. On the outside, he saw what others saw — four men who were fishermen — but he saw more. He

saw them in all their full potential, not only as they were, but as they could be, and he helped them see themselves in a new light. That's what unpacking and repacking your bags can do.

The gospel stories are filled with examples of Jesus seeing what others missed. He saw Zacchaeus up in a tree and saw in him a man who needed to unpack and repack his bags if his journey through life was going to go in the right direction.

As you unpack and repack your bags over and over again in your life, and as you begin the next part of your life's journey, don't be surprised if at some points you feel fearful and lost. Let's say you've gone through the repacking process. You've figured out what really matters to you and made changes in your life to pack more of what matters into it. But despite all this, you find yourself in a place that doesn't feel right. You don't know why you're here, what you're doing, or why you're doing it. You wonder why you ever listened to the repacking message at all. That certainly happened to Simon Peter and some of the other disciples.

Yet isn't it better to have tried something and failed than to spend the rest of your life wondering how it would have been if you had?

I came across a study showing that in interviews with people in their 60s, 70s, and 80s, one consistent theme emerges. Most people don't look back on their life and fear death. The number one fear of these older adults is that their lives have been meaningless — that they haven't lived as fully as possible, haven't taken enough chances, that they haven't considered repacking their bags.

In the movie Grumpy Old Men, Jack Lemmon's 94-year-old father tells him that the only thing you ever regret in life is the risks you didn't take. If you're lost, at least you've taken the risks. The other positive thing is that if you're lost, at least you know you're lost. But if you think you know exactly where you are and where you're headed, maybe it's been too long since you've stopped to see where you are. You might be lost and not know it.

Sometimes feeling lost is the first necessary step in finding yourself. It has been said that at the deepest level, all fear is fear of the unknown. Therefore, when you consider repacking and ask yourself, "What if I get lost?" you are expressing your concern and fear about the unknown. That's normal.

So if the idea of unpacking, leaving some things behind, and repacking seems terrifying, the good news is that doing it is the one sure way to make the fear go away.

This story from the Gospel of Mark invites you to do some repacking. This week, do some unpacking, look at what you're carrying, consider what you need to leave behind, and then decide what you need to add as you repack for the continuation of your life's journey. Amen.