Book 33

Sunday January 26, 1997

REPACKING YOUR BAGS Mark 1:14-20

There's a worn-out view of adulthood which is still too much 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 or even 50 or more.

Mid-life is that point in your journey when you begin to reflect on who you are and why, when 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 that time when you begin to become aware that you are carrying too much baggage from the past, but do not 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, your goals, all have given your life a fullness, but at the same time, often seemed more than you could bear. You begin to wonder if all you have packed in your life has left any room for truly living. Furthermore is what you are carrying with you what you are going to be needing 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 or not 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 or not they are good ones which continue to lead you in the right direction or bad ones that are leading you off course.

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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 then

repack their bags. The account given of this meeting in the gospel of Mark is very brief, but remember it is only a short-hand condensed report of what happened. That's the way 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. It's fun to have it so condensed because then we can use our imaginations to fill in the details and 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 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 the gospel of Mark loves to use the word "immediately." It's used 35 times in his short gospel. The gospel of John uses the word only 2 times, Matthew 14 times and Luke 12 times. Remember too that almost all Biblical scholars are convinced that both Matthew and Luke had the gospel of Mark in their possession when they wrote theirs but they slowed things down in telling their version 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 it. 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 the invitation of Jesus, 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 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.

Repacking your bags

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 the continuation of their backpacking hike in the morning.

Their guide the next day was to be the chief of the village, a tall, lean Massai man named Koyie. He is able to speak English fluently because of having been educated at a missionary school. Koyie is a gregarious witty man who has the uncanny ability to move easily between the two worlds of the tourist group and that of his own culture.

The next morning the group of 12 with Koyie as

the guide, continues the journey. Richard, who is otherwise responsible for the group is wearing a brand-new backpack. It is one of those high-tech ultralight models designed for maximum cargo-carrying efficiency. It is covered with snaps, clasps and zippers, full of pockets and pouches, compartments inside compartments and it is stuffed with all kinds of items.

As they walk along, Koyie keeps glancing at Richard's over- stuffed backpack. That evening as the group is setting up camp for the night, Richard offers to show Koyie his backpack and what he has in it. He wants to impress the village chief with how carefully he has packed for the journey.

With pride, he lays it on the ground, unzips the

many zippers, and unsnaps pockets and from the many compartments produces all sorts of strange and wonderful items--eating utensils, cutting devices, digging tools, direction finders, clothing, medical supplies and more. When it is all spread out, Richard looks at Koyie for his reaction. He seems amused, but silent. Finally after several minutes of surveying everything, Koyie turns and asks, "Does all this make you happy?"

Richard is stunned. There is something very powerful about Koyie's question. His words seemed to 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 had gotten

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 villages. 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 which are not adding something to your life, but taking 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 which they have willingly taken on. They are convinced that 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.

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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 re-packed. 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 rather like a heavy load which I would rather not carry.

Remember Jesus said, "Come unto me all you that are weary and heavy laden 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 11:28-29)

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 that they might have at first been fearful 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 some new things about themselves of which they were heretofore unaware. Or another way to put it is, Jesus saw in them some possibilities which 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 he saw in him a man who needed to unpack and repack his bag 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, do not 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 you've 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 or 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 60's, 70's and 80's, 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, 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 are 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 your 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 are carrying, consider what you need to leave behind and then what you need to add as repack for the continuation of your life's journey. Amen.