

PACKING LIGHT

July 8, 2018

Pentecost 7

[2nd Corinthians 12:2-10](#)

[Mark 6:1-13](#)

(prayer)

There is no more avoiding it.

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The solstice has passed; School is out; Canada and the US have had their national holidays; almost all of the church groups and committees won't have their next gatherings until September; and I have already snuck out to Pigeon Lake to play guitar at campfire, where most of my kids are busy working at church camp.

There is no avoiding the fact that...

Summer has arrived.

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Summer can be an opportunity for some people to take a little time away. This may be especially true for people with school-age children or those who work at places where July and August can be slower months.

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When gifted with *time away*, we make choices of what we will continue to hold on to and what to set aside. This can be a practical activity if we are packing to go away (space can be limited): what will we choose to have with us and what will we do without for a while? In other words, what familiar things (what necessary things, what comforting things) will we choose to bring from home?

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"Time Away" does not necessarily have to involve *getting away* physically. Setting aside the pressures of busier circumstances can be very healthy and rejuvenating.

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If (for you) summer is not a time that you leave your home town, or even get extended time off, there can still be opportunities to explore what is deeply necessary and comforting to us.

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In less than two weeks, I will be heading to Oshawa (Ontario) for nine days to attend the forty-third General Council meeting of the United Church of Canada. As the holder of a specific credit card, I will get one fee-free bag for the plane ride. I'm pretty frugal so one suitcase is my limit.

What do I want to have with me?

What do I need to have with me?

What can I live without?

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Fortunately - unlike the other times that I was a commissioner to General Council (1994 and 2006) - all of the reports, proposals and other *paperwork* for the meeting are now in an online cloud, so a couple of heavy binders can give way to this light tablet and a charging cable. In fact, in 2006, with all of the amended handouts that were passed out *during* the meeting, my suitcase was significantly overweight for the flight home. In retrospect, I regret the strain I must have caused the ground crew at the Thunder Bay airport.

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The new testament book of Mark is thought to be the first of the biblical gospels to have been written (early 50s CE). The so-called [Two-Source Hypothesis](#) presumes that Matthew's and Luke's authors (independently) used Mark as one of the base texts for their own gospels. Because later editors and compilers are more likely to *add* material than take it out, it makes sense that Mark is the shortest of the NT gospels.

Even so, Mark moves pretty quickly through its narratives.

There is no Christmas in Mark. It starts with Jesus travelling from Nazareth in Galilee to the Jordan River valley east of Jerusalem where he is baptised by John.

Unlike Luke and Matthew, Mark shares no specifics about Jesus' forty days of temptation in the wilderness after that baptism.

Without giving the reader any details, Mark implies that Jesus stayed among John's disciples until after John was arrested.

All of *this* (Jesus' baptism, the 40 days in the wilderness and time spent with John) take up only four and a half verses of chapter one in the gospel of Mark.

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After John's arrest, Jesus takes John's basic message back north to Galilee (*repent for the kingdom of god has come near*).

Although Galilee was Jesus' home region, he did not go *home* to the town of Nazareth to proclaim this good news. Instead, he stayed 'away from home' - teaching and healing in and around the various fishing villages along the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. It was there (by the sea) that - according to Mark - Simon, Andrew, John and James began to follow Jesus. Mark implies that Jesus used Simon's house in Capernaum as his ministry-home-base.

By the end of chapter one in Mark, Jesus was becoming so well known that he "could no longer go into a town openly". Even when he stayed out in the countryside or returned to Simon's home, people still came to Jesus from every direction.

As Mark advances his gospel narrative over the next few chapters, Jesus' words and actions lead to a reputation that caught the attention of both fans and opponents alike.

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For the most part, Jesus stays *away from* his Nazareth *home* - including sailing to other shores of the Sea of Galilee.

It is not until the final verses of chapter three when we first read that Jesus brings his new reputation back to Nazareth.

The change in his personality and focus was so dramatic that his neighbours and family members openly speculated about his mental health.

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Mark's gospel implies that today's reading from chapter six is only the second time that Jesus had been home since he first left to seek out John the Baptist by the Jordan River.

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In the fishing villages, it was common for Jesus to share powerful teachings and stories in the local synagogues. In those places, Jesus was respected as an authoritative rabbi.

But... the people of Nazareth knew the *pre-john-the-baptist* Jesus. They were caught off guard by Jesus' new style.

Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of

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power are being done by his hands!
Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and
are not his sisters here with us?

Jesus was led to conclude that...

Prophets are not without honour, except in their home town, and among their own kin.

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Jesus had encountered opposition before, but it was typically from people who disagreed with his theology or his interpretation of the Torah: but in Nazareth, people could not set aside their assumptions about Jesus (whom they knew as a child) to even listen to the content of what he was saying.

Clearly, this experience was hard for Jesus; and more than a bit frustrating.

I suspect that a lot of us can understand how Jesus felt. We want our families to be happy with the person we have become. The opinions (of those who have known us the longest) matter to us. And yet, because they have old memories of us, those people can have difficulty accepting that we have matured.

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By the summer of 2014, 23 year old singer-songwriter, Taylor Swift had already released four professionally produced studio albums. She was the youngest artist ever signed by Sony Music.

In 2008, I saw her as a teenager (my daughter's age) opening for country superstars Rascal Flats. The guitar was almost as big as her.

On August 18th, 2014, Taylor Swift debuted the first single from what would be her fifth album.

Describing that song, she said "*I've had every part of my life dissected - my choices, my actions, my words, my body, my style, my music. When you live your life under that kind of scrutiny, you can either let it break you, or you can get really good at dodging punches. And when one lands, you know how to deal with it. And I guess the way that I deal with it is to [shake it off](#).*"

The haters gonna hate, hate, hate, hate, hate.
I'm just gonna shake, shake, shake, shake, shake.
Shake it off. Shake it off.

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The implication in today's scripture reading is that Jesus had to learn how to *shake off* the disappoint of rejection and to put his energy into the next opportunity.

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This is not an easy thing to do.

I remember hearing Jerry Lewis interviewed one time at the height of his work with the Muscular Dystrophy telethons. He talked about getting thousands of letters of support and encouragement (yes those were actual paper letters delivered by actual postal workers), but that when the rare critical letter arrived, it devastated him in a disproportionate way.

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Shaking It Off takes work.

It takes focus.

It takes confidence.

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In the reading from Second Corinthians, we get a glimpse how the Apostle Paul struggled with his confidence; all of this in spite of the success he had in sharing his version of Jesus' gospel to a variety of communities in southern Europe and Asia Minor.

Paul began this section of the letter by describing an amazing mystical experience of being granted a glimpse into the Realm of God.

Although, Paul speaks in the third person ("I know a guy who was caught away to the third heaven"), many scholars speculate that Paul might, actually, be talking about himself.

I don't allow myself to get too worried about trying to figure out what is meant by "third" heaven and how it might relate to other *levels* of heaven. I know that many ancient cultures and religions in the Mesopotamian region were known to describe "seven heavens" sometimes referring, simply, to the daytime sky, where birds fly; or the night sky where the moon, stars and planets dwelled.

In the Jewish Talmud, the universe is made up of seven shamiyam (heavens). The first component of the Talmud (the Mishnah) didn't take written form until the 3rd century, but it is based on oral traditions that would have been known in Paul's time in the first century.

What Paul meant by *third heaven* is unclear: although his audience might have had a better understanding than modern scholars do.

And... it doesn't really matter, because the whole point of Paul sharing this story is to not to give a lecture on the physical structure of the heavens, but to give an example of something that would be a legitimate subject for boasting.

If Paul is - in fact - the "friend" that he is speaking about, verse five is kind of comical to read: *On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast.*

But I get it. Paul is not interested in people granting him extra authority because of a mysterious experience he might have had fourteen years ago. He doesn't want himself (as a person) to distract from the message of God's grace. This is probably why this *wonder worthy* story is immediately followed up with a *less enviable* one... without going into details, Paul mentions a *thorn in his side* that keeps him humble. Again, maybe his audience knew what he was talking about even if we don't.

Again it doesn't matter. It is not about *what* Paul's weakness is. The message that Paul wants to Corinthians to hear is that *God's grace is sufficient. Even in the context of weakness, insults, hardships, persecutions and calamities, God is strong enough to hold us up.*

Paul encourages the church to *shake off* its focus on weaknesses and to embrace the strong grace of God.

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After Nazareth, Jesus sent his disciples out to various other towns. And he passed on his wisdom about having the focus of a shake-it-off attitude.

Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. 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.

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What I find interesting about Jesus sending out his followers on these mini mission trips, is that they were to pack lightly: *take nothing for the journey except a staff: no bread, no bag, no money; wear sandals and do not put on two shirts.*

This luggage expectation makes it pretty clear that Jesus' followers were going to have to establish familial relationships with the strangers they encountered along the way.

They were encouraged to trust in the attractiveness of the gospel that they had to share; to build relationships; and... to be focused on the opportunities before them and not any disappointments behind them.

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They were told to literally *shake off* the disappointments and move on.

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Disappointing experiences can be learning experiences.

They can allow us to critically examine our style: to refine what is important to us and how we might best communicate that.

But, most of us are guilty of holding on to disappointments that no longer serve any good purpose in our lives.

If too much of our energy is spent looking back --reliving in our heart and minds-- a past that we can not change, the energy available for new opportunities can be limited.

Shake it off.

Be at peace in this new moment.

And move on.

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I have a final word on Jesus call to pack light.

And it does not come directly from the story in Mark.

I took note of the double meaning of the English words of the title I chose for this sermon today.

Jesus literally instructs his disciples to pack light: in other words to bring as little as possible on the journey.

And yet, implied in that instruction is that the message they bring is a guiding light. So, we could say that they disciples needed to pack "light"... as in the *light of the world* - God's word as a light to their path.

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I will let this be the final word for today.

Our good news (gospel) is founded in God's love for all creation. This is a strength gifted to us, even in the context of our deepest weaknesses.

God's grace lights our way.

As the psalmist said, *even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will not be afraid; for you - God - are with me; your rod and your staff: they comfort me..* (Ps23:)

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God's grace is sufficient!

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Let us pray:

Lead us, O God, into relationships that strengthen your love in the world. Amen.

#374VU "Come and Find the Quiet Centre"

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