

## Backpacks and Tourist Traps

I want to begin by backing up a bit in this chapter of Luke and consider today's passage in tandem with a passage that occurs at the beginning of Chapter 9. You may recall the scene where Jesus is sending out the disciples telling them, "Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money, not even an extra tunic."

And I want to partner that thought with Peter's response to witnessing the transfiguration of Jesus, which is that he wants to build tents or tabernacles, one each for Moses, Elijah and Jesus so as to commemorate or memorialize what has just happened. Which, for whatever reason, is a bad idea, according to the narrator's voice, which jumps in at this point, telling us that Peter said this, "Not knowing what he said." Or as paraphrased in the Message version, "He blurted this out without thinking."

And I want to put them side by side because I think that these two passages, taken together, actually say a lot about how we should live and travel through this life, about what we should carry and what we should commemorate and about the dangers of carrying too much and the potential problems of memorializing too much.

And so the title of this sermon is "Backpacks and Tourist Traps".

### Backpacks

In his book of short stories about the Vietnam War, entitled "The Things They Carried", Minnesota author Tim O'Brien writes fictionalized accounts of his days in Vietnam. In the title

story, he writes of a Lieutenant who, even though he had only one date before he was deployed, carries photos and letters from his “girl back home”, reading into every word of every letter more than was intended, embellishing every memory, creating a romantic relationship out of a friendship. Until he realizes that his distraction threatens the lives of the very men he is required to lead, pulling his focus from the work at hand – survival – and, instead of bringing balance and peace to his life, what he is carrying may only bring pain. So he burns the pictures and letters, knowing that the things he carries may well be a source of death, not a source of life.

What do we carry with us? What is in our metaphorical backpack that tugs on our shoulders? How might we rearrange things to both lighten the load and for the things we carry to help us, not weigh us down?

I actually don't think it is either realistic or healthy to try and leave everything behind. We often dream of starting over, wiping the slate clean, “tomorrow is a new day” and with it seems the promise that all the hurts, disappointments and misfortunes of today simply won't be there when we awake tomorrow. But they usually are. Sitting right where we left them the day before.

So maybe the goal is not to leave it all behind, maybe the goal is to make sure that “the things we carry” don't overwhelm us, that “the things we carry” are balanced and useful and that we occasionally rifle through the pack, redistribute the load, take less of some things and more of others, wrap that sharp stone in something soft so it will stop irritating us, and make sure that what we carry serves us well for the journey. And as we rearrange things, keep in mind that often the painful events of our lives, when given an appropriate amount of space, not too

much, not too little, are often some of the most useful things we carry.

Jesus tells his disciples not to carry anything, at least anything one would normally take on a journey. And I think what he is really trying to say is, "Travel light, travel smart and do not be afraid to depend on those around you as you journey through life."

### Tourist Traps

Peter, James and John have traveled up the mountain to pray, and we know that something amazing is about to happen, for amazing things happen on mountains. And Elijah and Moses appear to Jesus, both of whom had their own mountaintop experiences, and the disciples hear them talking to Jesus who has become transfigured, is literally glowing with the presence of God. And the disciples are sleepy but hanging on, foreshadowing another time soon to come in the Garden of Gethsemane where they will again, be sleepy, but don't hang on.

And then Peter, don't you just love Peter? Such an enthusiastic puppy, so in the moment, so excited and excitable. And Peter says, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." Or put another way, "That was so amazing! If we put up some booths, you all could stay around and people would come to see this! They would pay money for this. Two shows a day, three on Sunday, Saturdays off, we could have some food trucks over there, bring in some port-a-potties maybe get someone to play a little music!" And lo and behold, the 1<sup>st</sup> century equivalent of Disneyworld is born.

But Peter only wants to do what many of us want to do. We want to hang on to the moment, bask in what seems to have been a marvelous experience, and then repeat it, keep going back, find a locus that give us the chance to re-live and re-experience this life-changing event. Find some way of retrieving that moment, to feel it, just one more time.

And so well-meaning intentions to memorialize and commemorate events and places can morph into tourist traps. And there is a difference between tourist traps and memorials. The tourist trap has lost all connection with what gave it birth. Whereas a memorial connects you to what gave rise to the experience.

I once was talking to the pilgrims about the growth of pilgrimages in the Middle Ages. The idea was that if you had relics you could get pilgrims, if you had pilgrims you could support a market and if you had a market, your town would thrive. But the relics are the key. You need something unique that will attract people, something they cannot experience anywhere else. Like the Wisconsin Dells, without the Dells there is no reason to go there, and then up popped the question, "What are the dells?" And this was from someone who had been to the dells! "Well, the dells are what gave rise to the whole thing. It is the natural wonder of the area that made it what it is. It is what people actually went to experience. That is, before all they went to experience were fudge shops and t-shirt shops and artificial water parks."

We have to be careful about what and how we memorialize the important events and experiences of our lives. For if we are not careful, they may become tourist traps, so removed from what actually happened, that they no longer serve to connect

to an experience, they now only serve as a distraction and as entertainment.

In my head this sermon started with a postcard. It is one of the things I carry. A card I received from my brother shortly after I experienced my cardiac event last summer. You see a few years before, my brother had done a crossing of the Atlantic in a 40' sailboat with two other friends. I had made him a couple of music playlists to take along. One of them was for those midnight watches when there was a gentle breeze, the stars were magnificent and you were consumed by the utter beauty and tranquility of the universe.

The other play list I called the "I am not going to die today" playlist, for when you had to lash yourself to the mast and hang on for dear life.

On the card he sent me was a picture taken from the deck of the boat on one of those "I am not going to die today" days. The waves cresting in the distance, the camera lens wet with spray, the boat listing severely to starboard. And inside he wrote, "This is the kind of day I played the 'Bill, no die' music. You won't die. You have too much to give the world and you'll get more time."

It is now one of the things I carry. And I carry it, not because he was the only person to say that I had things left to do, but because my brother is not really a religious person, and when he said it, it had an impact that I wanted to retain. And so each time it falls out of my calendar – because I am literally carrying it – I enter into that space of surprise and wonder and I smile and I wince a little, because I don't really feel like I have "too much to give the world" but I love the idea that my brother thinks that this is true.

“What are the things we carry?” and “What are the things we memorialize?” Take a look in your pack, make sure it serves you well and if what you want to memorialize has become a tourist trap you may want to scale things back a bit. Peel back the layers and uncover the thing itself.

Jesus knew we needed to travel lightly and memorialize effectively. We would all do well to heed the advice.

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Luke 9: 28-36