

Starting Points for Lenten Sermons

By

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To Accompany

The Conference Study of Mark's Gospel

Go! Be The Church!

Ash Wednesday

(03-05-03)

A Companion Sermon Outline to Introduce the Bible Study on Mark:

“Ashes to Ashes”

Text “Another of his disciples said to him, ‘Lord, first let me go and bury my father.’ But Jesus said to him, ‘Follow me, and let the dead bury the dead.’” (Matthew 8:18-22)

Introduction This story is *not* told in Mark's Gospel, but it prepares the way for our study. This “hard saying” of Jesus needs to be heard and there's no better time than Lent!

First, the seeming harshness doesn't suggest Jesus has no feelings, or asks us to swallow ours. Indeed, Jesus often shows his feelings. Rather, it reminds us that no experience is bigger than our commitment to God. Even in the tough times, we affirm, “In life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with us. Thanks be to God.” We care, to be sure, but God is always our primary concern. **Second**, in the context of Lent, this passage does call us to take the measure our commitments, and to say of the unworthy, the counter-productive, and the merely shop-worn: “Ashes to ashes, and dist to dust.” **Third**, we must back up to the beginning of the story and hear another disciple say, “Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.” Whatever our accomplishments, we cannot settle down and make a shrine of them, we must be ready to follow wherever our Lord is leading us.

Conclusion And for those brave enough to take the measure of their commitments and follow Jesus, there is hope. Did you know the nursery rhyme “Ring Around the Rosie” had a strange and fearsome beginning? It originated during the plague called the Black Death, describes its symptoms, and reminds us that all of us die. “Ashes, Ashes, we all fall down.” But children playing the game today, remind us of greater truth, when they get up again. “And what makes it possible for disciples in the real world to get up?” we ask. And the answer is that it is the Lord Jesus Christ saying, “Follow me.”

Jesus gives us a measure for our professions of faith: We must be prepared to find there is no place to lay our heads and to feel like aliens in a strange land! But if we still dare to follow him, there is much more to come.

The First Sunday in Lent

(03-09-03)

A Companion Sermon Outline to Study Unit 1 on Mark 1-3:

“An Urgent Gospel for Urgent Times”

Text “Now, after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the Good News of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news.’” (Mark 1:14-15)

Introduction Rick Neal’s friend, Colonel Tom Deen, often said that one had to convey to the troops “the urgency of the situation.” They had to be shown the danger, necessity, or potential of the moment. Mark understands. In the first chapter, “immediately” appears 3 times, “at once” 2 more, and an “as soon as” is thrown in for good measure!

First, Jesus’ sense of urgency does not give way to elitism; he speaks to his hearers with fundamental confidence in people’s ability to respond. He doesn’t offer some sort of “conspiracy theory” that only a select few can decipher, let alone respond to. Historian Stephen Ambrose offers a comparison in the triumph of America’s Boy Scouts over the Nazi’s Hitler Youth at Omaha Beach! (*D-Day: June 6, 1944*, Page 579) **Second,** Jesus’ sense of urgency defines time in a very special way. It is *kairos* time and not *kronos* time that matters. We don’t have to read tealeaves to divine a calendar date; we only need to seek opportune moments for faithfulness in order to be “timely” by Jesus’ reckoning. **Third,** Jesus’ reminds us that experiencing the “time of our lives” may be bittersweet. In a classic “good news and bad news” comparison, he declares, “Repent and believe the good news!” We just need to work through the bad news to get to the good. This repentance can be cataclysmic and dramatic, like Paul’s in Acts 9:1-9, or it can take the form of what John Myers calls a “pigeon walk.” He describes it this way: “Focus, walk a little way, turn your head, focus, walk a little way. You see, a pigeon is terribly shortsighted. It can only see a short distance. And once it gets to its intended destination, it has to refocus, adjust, and move in a new direction.”

Conclusion Jesus’ has confidence in our ability to handle our day’s “urgent situation,” if only we can act decisively now and not someday, and can accept getting outside of our “comfort zone” in order to find greater satisfaction. Maybe we can manage that in one dramatic change, but even if we can only “pigeon walk,” we can still begin repenting and refocusing

The Second Sunday in Lent

(03-16-03)

A Companion Sermon Outline to Study Unit 2 on Mark 4-6:

“Disciples are Called and Sent”

Text “He called the twelve to him and began to send them out.” (Verse 7 from Mark 6:6b-13)

Introduction The call of disciples in Mark 1:14-20 is not complete until we see its final outcome in 6:6. The Lord links calling and sending!

First, a look at that initial call shows that it anticipates its outcome. Jesus’ metaphor of discipleship as “going fishing for people” leaves little room for misunderstanding. (What is there about the image we don’t understand?) Although some fisherman may wonder at his willingness to share the news of where the fish are biting. John Myers recalls a deep sea fishing trip where the captain gave these instructions: “When you see birds over the water, don’t point! The other fisherman will follow you!” Jesus turned the world upside down for those fishermen when he said, “Follow me! I will make you fishers of men.” He wanted them to know where the big catch was; he still does today. **Second**, it also demonstrates that Jesus’ helpful hints reflect his mastery of life. Peter must have wondered what a landlubber from Nazareth could show him about fishing. Rick Neal is a private pilot and he says, “It is like the day I flew over a fishing boat that was trolling around an aid to navigation offshore in the Atlantic. I could see a school of fish was ‘keeping station’ on the far side of the post; they were moving around it just fast enough to keep away from the fishermen! I wagged the wings and pointed at the school of fish, but they just thought I was being friendly and waved back. After all who would expect help from such an unexpected source. But from my perspective, I knew more about the fishing that day than the fishermen did!” **Third**, it is important to remember all the preparation that falls between the calling and sending. (Mark 1:14-6:6) Jesus does not send out ill-equipped disciples. **Fourth**, He does indeed send them out. With some very interesting final instructions, he puts them to work. As Peter Drucker, the management guru puts it, “Sooner or later, planning degenerates into work.” (*Management*, Pages 128-129) John Myers suggests that we are sent out as “Manufacturer’s Representatives.” He explains, “Often, when I meet a new person outside of the context of the church and they ask what I do for a living, I will say, ‘I am a manufacturer’s representative.’ ‘Really?’ they will respond. ‘What company?’ I say, ‘The largest company in the world.’ ‘When was it founded?’ they ask. I say, ‘It’s the oldest company in the world!’ ‘Really?’ they continue. ‘What does the company make and sell?’ I say, ‘Assurance.’ And they say, ‘Don’t you mean insurance?’ Then I tell them, ‘I am a manufacturer’s representative for God!’ That, more often than not, opens the door for a conversation about God’s love.”

Conclusion In the Spring of 1862, President Lincoln became impatient with repeated postponements of a planned offensive. General McClellan had recruited, equipped, and trained 110,000 men, making them the “most formidable force yet seen on American soil.” But he was clearly reluctant to start the campaign. The President concluded, “It is called the Army of the Potomac, but it is only (General) McClellan’s bodyguard. If he is not using the army, I should like to borrow it for a while.” (Morison and Commager, *The Growth of the American Republic*, Page 719) I wonder sometimes, if God looks at his reluctant Church and says, “Perhaps I could borrow it for a while?”

The Third Sunday in Lent

(03-23-03)

A Companion Sermon Outline to Study Unit 3 on Mark Chapters 7-10:
“The Many Voices of a Disciple”

Text “...and on the way, he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say that I am?’ (Verse 27 from Mark 8:27-35)

Introduction There is an old preacher’s story that tells you how to identify a person’s basic commitments by the way they answer any serious question:

A Baptist will respond, “The Bible tells us...”

A Roman Catholic will respond, “The Church teaches us...”

A Pentecostal will respond, “The Spirit leads us...”

And a United Methodist will respond, “Well, if you want my opinion...”

Sooner or later, disciples must speak up, and, in doing so, they reveal the nature and depth of their discipleship.

First, a disciple must be able to speak for others! There are good reasons for this: We listen and learn from others. We care for them by paying attention. We speak for those who have no voice. **Second**, a disciple must be able to speak for him or herself. We not only echo the lessons, feelings, and needs of others; we speak from our own. “If you want my opinion” is an acceptable and even necessary part of growing in discipleship. **Third**, a disciple must dare to speak God’s Words. This can be a humbling experience (as the case at hand demonstrates!) but sooner or later a disciple must confess his commitments. It may not be popular, it may even go against the grain of his or her own habits and customs, but it will be God’s Word on the subject.

Conclusion It is no easy task to perform faithfully, but the disciple must speak with many voices.

Perhaps this was the wisdom of Peter Bohler’s advise to a discouraged John Wesley. Wesley contemplated leaving off preaching. “By no means,” Bohler said. “What shall I preach?” asked Wesley. “Preach faith *till* you have it;” came the answer, “and then *because* you have it, you *will* preach faith.” (Author’s emphasis in Wesley’s *Journal*, Volume I, Page 87)

The Fourth Sunday in Lent

(03-30-03)

A Companion Sermon Outline to Study Unit 4 on Mark Chapters 14-16:

“The Cost of Discipleship: Part I, The Promissory Note”

Text “Well said, Teacher,’ the man replied.” (Verse 32 in NIV from Mark 12:28-34)

Introduction It is interesting that Mark remembers this story as taking place late in the ministry of Jesus. It is part of the thrust and parry of the final duel between Jesus and his critics in Jerusalem. What makes the story arresting is that when one of the scribes asks Jesus a pointed question, he is so struck with Jesus’ answer he exclaims, “Well said, Teacher!” Even those who questioned him knew he had that part right.

Here is Jesus’ last, best definition of discipleship: Love God before all else, and love your neighbor as yourself.”

First, the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one, and beside him there is no other.’” It only makes sense to say that if God is truly God, no other god – no commitment, no tradition, no experience, no accomplishment, no possession, no other thing – comes before him. **Second**, the scribe continues, “To love (God) with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength” that we can muster is our basic commitment. Instead of asking the rebellious question, “Why must I do or give this or that?” the disciple asks the humble question, “How can I withhold anything from his will?” Remember the old love song, “All of me, why not take all of me... You took the part that was once my heart, so why not take all of me?” This ought to be our love song to God. **Third**, the scribe concludes, “To love one’s neighbor as oneself – this is much more than all the (other) sacrifices and offerings.” Rick Neal has a friend named David Carpenter, who really is a carpenter, and a master carpenter at that! His favorite pastime is to make and give away sets of three wooden letters that spell “JOY.” They are always accompanied with an explanation that joy comes with the proper ordering of our lives: Jesus, Others, and Yourself.

Conclusion When the scribe asked Jesus to answer his question, he was no doubt aware that there were 613 laws from which to choose the most important. After he heard Jesus’ discerning answer, it is no wonder he exclaimed, “Well said, Teacher!”

Imagine yourself standing in the lot of one of those super dealerships with 613 cars around you and asking the sales rep what he has that fit your needs and price range. Now imagine the sales rep taking you directly to another part of that huge lot and saying, “There’s the one for you.” And it was perfect! Finally, imagine that it was one of those retro Volkswagen Beetles, and the sales rep, who has miraculously become Jesus, adds, “Remember, this is a Love Bug. Ride it only on the true and lively way, and be sure to give someone else a lift every chance you get.”

This definition of discipleship is real to Jesus. It becomes his “*promissory note*” and, in a very short time, Jesus will be called upon to pay in full, to demonstrate that he “not only talks the talk, but walks the walk.”

The Fifth Sunday in Lent

(04-06-03)

A Companion Sermon Outline to Study Unit 5 on Chapters 14-16:

“The Cost of Discipleship: Part II, Paid in Full”

Text “Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, “Truly, this man was God’s Son!” (Verse 39 from Mark 15:25-39)

Introduction Mark makes it clear that the measure of discipleship that Jesus laid before friend and foe alike – love God before all else and love your neighbor as yourself – is

lived out in full in his own life. To make this truth even more obvious, Mark has an impartial observer, the Gentile Centurion leading the Guard Detail, reach the same conclusion. Jesus has taken his promissory note and paid it in full.

First, we must acknowledge Jesus as the model for our discipleship. Rick Neal cherishes the passage in Hebrews that reminds us that we run the race “looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.” (Hebrews 12:2) He says, “It reminds us that Jesus has not only explored the way ahead of us, but blazed a trail for us to follow.” **Second**, we must dare to follow in his footsteps. “Think, not only of Jesus, but the people who modeled their lives on him and were in turn models for you,” Neal continues, “For example, Rita Harrison was my Junior High Youth Counselor, yet she was hardly the person one would imagine in that role. She was in her fifties and as a young adult she had been afflicted with polio, so she walked with two canes and drove a car with special hand controls for the accelerator and brakes. The fact that her car just happened to be a tomato red Olds convertible tells you something of her spirit, but ultimately, it was her faith, love and courage inspired a whole generation of youth in her church. Now think of how you can model your life on the life of Christ, and perhaps become a model your self.”

Third, we must do this in a fashion that is not over-bearing in its self-proclaimed and self-promoting goodness, but is evident enough even to the outsider, who comes to realize there is something pure, something kindly, something sacrificial about us that cannot be denied! John Myers remembers how much he loved reading *The Velveteen Rabbit* to his children when they were small. It has a beautiful passage about authenticity we are considering:

“What is *real*?” asked the rabbit one day. “Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?”

“Real isn’t how you were made,” said the Skin Horse. “It’s the thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but *really* loves you, then you become Real. It doesn’t happen all at once. You become. It takes a long time. That’s why it generally doesn’t happen to those who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But those things don’t matter at all, because once you are Real you can’t be ugly, except to people who don’t understand.”

Conclusion What should be the aspiration of every disciple of Christ? To follow in the way our Lord Jesus Christ leads us, through death itself if need be, until we become no more or less than his brothers and sisters, real children of God. This is Bonhoeffer’s “costly grace,” and its outcome is that when others look at us, they will see something of the Master. (*The Cost of Discipleship*, Pages 47-48)

Palm Sunday or Passion Sunday

(04-13-03)

A Concluding Companion Sermon Outline to the Study: “The Joys of Discipleship”

Text “Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting ‘Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!’” (Verses 9-10 from Mark 11:1-11)

Introduction All too often, while we are observing today’s celebration, we are looking over our shoulders towards the trials of Golgotha. “Shame on you for rejoicing!” we say with a frown. “Don’t you see how hollow these cheers will prove to be?” Ironically, we sound a lot like those Sadducees of long ago trying to hush the followers of Jesus.

This glance to the side is not completely unreasonable, of course, because the day does have a “split personality.” In fact, we call it by two names, Palm Sunday and Passion Sunday! But for today, I would like our discussion of discipleship to emphasize the joyous present, and to leave contemplating the cross for Good Friday.

Among Christ’s disciples, those who are pastors know something of what is required. We go from joy to sorrow and back again all the time. The scene at the hospital needs to be left behind when we go on to a wedding rehearsal. There is no call to blight someone’s happiness with an untimely reminder of someone else’s anxiety. No more than there is a need to deny someone’s tears because of someone else’s victory.

Sometimes, like a diver who comes up from the depths to the surface too rapidly, a pastor gets a case of emotional “bends,” so he or she needs to learn how to decompress from one situation before moving to the next one. Today’s lesson on discipleship has to do with that ability.

So what does this day tell us about the joys of discipleship?

First, there is joy over the accomplishments that bring us here. Even if there is still unfinished business, there is no need to impeach all that has been done on the way to Jerusalem. Listen carefully and hear the Lord say, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” **Second**, there is joy in the moment we are sharing with Jesus now. We are in good company. And if Jesus, who knows better than anybody what is yet to come, will not stop his disciples from celebrating, who are we to hush them? **Third**, there is joy in the future God promises. There is no need to be anxious about tomorrow. If we can foresee hardship and even sacrifice, we can also anticipate the ultimate victory. One of the angels who has dished out seven bowls full of judgment says, “Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb!” (Revelation 21:9) If we are faithful in the hard times, we will see the New Jerusalem adorned like the beloved of her husband.

Conclusion Rick Neal observes, “My wife, Sandy, has a book in her kitchen called *The Joys of Cooking*. She has fed her family well from the pages of that book over the years. But all the same, the joy has occasionally been tempered with disappointment. So the question arises, does the memory of a dish that did not turn out cancel the pleasure found in all the dishes that have been so very satisfying? Or should a “burnt offering” be so discouraging that we vow never to try it again? No, of course not. The joy of cooking transcends that sort of thinking.

“Just so, the joy of discipleship is stronger than any grief, past, present, or future. We cannot deny the failures, but neither can we let them discourage us from gladly following the Master.”

A concluding note from the authors:

These outlines were prepared to coincide with the Lenten Bible Study by Linda Mobley from a paper prepared by Larry Rankin and Roger Swanson for the Committee on Congregational Transformation. We hope you can see some useful connections between our work and this excellent study!

Illustrations from other sources are footnoted for your convenience; personal anecdotes are identified, not out of pride, but to let you know they are original to us and you are welcome to use them.

We hope you will find these materials useful pump-priming for you own Lenten sermons.

Rick Neal
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