

“They Couldn’t Take Them Too”
Mark 1:16-20; Genesis 12:1-4
1st Sunday in Lent

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Last year, the author Barbara Kingsolver won a Pulitzer Prize for her splendid novel, *Demon Copperhead*. It’s a gripping novel, one that I would highly recommend...but there’s an earlier novel that first introduced me to Kingsolver, a novel that is equally good, in my opinion.

The Poisonwood Bible.
Do any of you remember that?

It tells the story of the Price family, who are on a mission to the Belgian Congo in 1959. Nathan Price is a Baptist preacher who has felt the call to go to Africa for a year. He’s married to Orleana, and they have four daughters.

In the novel’s opening chapter, there’s an amusing scene that sets up one of the themes of the entire book. In chapter one, the daughter Leah describes what the family thinks they will need when they’re over there, and what they tried to bring with them...things like:

Betty Crocker cake mix, a dozen cans of deviled ham,
a hand mirror, a stainless-steel thimble,
a good pair of scissors...and on and on and on.

But when they arrive at the airport, they are told that no more than 44 pounds per person will be allowed. And the family must decide what to leave behind.

And they can’t do it.
They get rid of some items, but they’re still carrying too much baggage.

Then they remember what the South Baptist Mission League told them before they left: the airlines will not weigh the passengers.

So, in a moment of creative desperation, what does the family do?

We struck out for Africa carrying all our excess baggage on our bodies—says Leah.

...we had clothes under our clothes. My sisters and I [ended up] wearing six pairs of underdrawers...several dresses one on top of the other...and outside of everything an all-weather coat...

The other goods, tools, cake-mix boxes and so forth were tucked out of sight in our pockets...surrounding us in a clanking armor.¹

It's a humorous image.
And a truthful image.

How often do you and I travel through life with things we don't really need? And how frequently do we resist leaving something behind, or letting something go?

I received an email from my mother in Michigan about a month or so ago. She was cleaning out the closet at home, and wanted to know what to do with the old baseball and football cards.

Now I long ago sorted through those cards, to make sure that I had in my possession the ones that I thought were valuable. Those cards are in our attic here in Greenville.

My mom was just asking about the extra cards, the worthless ones.

¹ Barbara Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible*, New York: HarperPerennial, 1998.

I could have told my mom to do whatever she wanted with them.
But what did I tell her to do with them?

I said—next time I’m visiting y’all in Michigan, I’ll bring an extra piece of luggage and we can put the cards in those!

What am I thinking?

If I bring those baseball cards home, they’re just going to sit in a box in our attic, instead of sitting in my parents’ attic.

But it’s hard, right?

Those cards represent my childhood, they represent nostalgia...

It’s hard to leave some things behind.

It’s hard to let pieces of our lives go.

I say it’s hard.

But you would never know it from our text.

Our text for today is the call of the disciples.

To Simon and his brother, Andrew, Jesus says:

“Follow me...”

And Mark writes:

“...immediately they left their nets and followed him.”

Then Jesus walks by James and John, sons of Zebedee, “who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.”

Let me get this straight.

Simon and Andrew and James and John hear Jesus's call...and
JUST LIKE THAT:

they left their livelihood behind,
and their families behind,
and the life they had always known—they let it ALL go?!!

Our topic today is **faith...as letting go.**

We are continuing our sermon series this morning on The Fabric of Faith. And according to scripture, faith always has something to do with letting go.

It's an appropriate topic for today.
The first Sunday in Lent.

Because during the season of Lent, there is a longstanding Christian tradition that asks followers of Jesus to engage in a spiritual discipline for 40 days.

It can take many shapes and forms.
Have any of you ever given something up for Lent before?

I tried doing that once.
Years ago, I decided that my Lenten discipline would be giving up...Gatorade!

That's right.
I am addicted to Gatorade.
Whenever we run out around the house, I'm headed to the store.
If it is 8:30 at night, and there's no Gatorade, I'm in the car.

So one Lent, I decided to give it up.

Day one went by...I can do this.

Day two went by...eh, I think I can do this.

Day three came around...and I was shopping at the store...and I walked by the Gatorade aisle...and this drool started moving down my chin.

What do you think I had in my car with all the other groceries on the way home?

Sweet Gatorade nectar!

I'm just not very good at letting go.

And to be perfectly straightforward, I don't want to put "letting go" up on some spiritual pedestal. Because there's a part of me that **LIKES** the fact that I don't like to let go. Because sometimes, life requires holding on. Do you remember the charge that I say to y'all almost every Sunday?

Go out into God's world in peace.

Have courage.

What comes next?

Hold on to what is good.

I didn't make that up.

It's in the Bible.

Romans, chapter 12, verse 9:

"Hold fast," Paul writes, "to what is good."

I don't think Paul made it up either.

Do you remember what Jesus did on the last night of his life?

He's in the Garden of Gethsemane, and he prays.

He "prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass..."

He said, ‘Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me...’”

He’s trying to hold on!
And I LOVE that that was Jesus’ prayer.

I love that the same person who told his disciples that the Son of Man must suffer and die, must suffer and be killed...asked God if he could hold on to his life.

I love that Jesus did not want to let go...of the life that he loved.

A number of years ago, Dr. Atul Gawande published an article in The New Yorker magazine. In that article, he told the story of a young woman named Sara Monopoli.

When Sara Monopoli was 39 weeks pregnant, she was diagnosed with cancer.

Sara was 34 years old at the time, and it made no sense.
So she had her child, Vivian, a healthy baby girl!
The next day, Sara went through blood tests and body scans.
Then in the weeks that followed, she went through this chemo and that chemo.

But her cancer was progressing.

Gawande tells this story because at no point in Sara Monopoli’s treatment did she receive the straight story: that her cancer was incurable, that she probably had only so many more months to live, even with the treatment.

And Dr. Gawande wasn’t throwing his colleagues under the bus.

Because Dr. Gawande himself was one of those doctors.

At one point, he spoke to Sara of an experimental therapy that, in his words, “could work”—which, he admits in hindsight, was “sheer fantasy.”

Gawande writes:

“Discussing a fantasy was easier—less emotional, less explosive—than discussing what was happening before my eyes.”²

Our topic this morning is letting go.
The spiritual discipline of letting go.
The call by Jesus...to let go.

How does one do it?
How does one let go of a particular future that you had in mind for your life?

Or a relationship that has meant so much to your life?

Or how do we simply move gracefully through the different seasons in life, without desperately trying to keep a firm grip on the life we used to know?

I remember when Dr. John Buchanan retired from Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago...he wrote a piece for *The Christian Century* called “Sunday Morning Blues.” Even though his Sunday mornings were free, and he could ride his bike by the waters of Lake Michigan on Sunday mornings if he wanted to do it, he said he didn’t want to do it.

² Atul Gawande, “Letting Go,” *The New Yorker*, July 26, 2010.

He missed getting up before dawn.
 He missed being with people he loved on Sunday mornings.
 But he also said he was learning some necessary lessons:

“I am learning that ministry is not my personal possession.”
 “I am learning to let the church be the church [without me].”

I am learning, he said, through “the painful process of letting go...”³

How do we let go?
 There are no formulas. No magic tricks.
 But there is something else...

In one of his books, the late priest Henri Nouwen writes about the time that he was invited to see the trapeze artists, the Flying Rodleighs.

“I will never forget how enraptured I became when I first saw the Rodleighs move through the air, flying and catching as elegant dancers.”

Nouwen approached one of them, and asked what it was like.
 To be in the air, to be so vulnerable.

And the leader, the flyer, said, “I must have complete trust in my catcher. The public might think I’m the star—but the real star is Joe, my catcher.”

“How does that work?” Nouwen asked.

“The secret,” Rodleigh said, “is that the flyer does nothing and the catcher does everything...”

³ The Rev. Dr. John Buchanan, “Sunday Morning Blues,” *The Christian Century*, August 21, 2013.

“The worst thing the flyer can do is try to catch the catcher...the flyer must trust, with outstretched arms, that the catcher will be there for him [when it’s time to let go].”⁴

It reminds me of something my father used to say to me when I was growing up. As I’ve shared with you before, my father is a retired professor of writing and rhetoric, which meant that when I was in high school and occasionally in college, I would talk with him about a paper I was working on.

And his first question was always the same question:
“What your thesis?”

In other words, what’s your point?
What do you need to be most clear about?

It was my father’s favorite question, and not just when it came to writing papers for school. I recall when I was 10 years old, my dad took me to see the movie, Rocky III.

Sylvester Stallone. Carl Weathers. Mr. T.
Leaving the theater, I was pumped!
On the way home, my dad did NOT ask me whether I liked the movie.

He said to me:
“Ben, what was the thesis of that movie?”
I rolled my eyes.

But over 40 years later, I can still hear the question:
What’s the thesis?

⁴ The story about Henri Nouwen and the flying Rodleighs can be found at [Henri Nouwen's Story about the Flyer and the Catcher | Healthy Spirituality](#).

As we begin this sacred season, what's the thesis?
What do we need to be clear about?
How about this?

When you make whatever jump you next need to make,
and you find yourself in the air, very vulnerable,
trust that the One flying TOWARD YOU...will be God.

God is always ready to catch you.
So don't try to be the catcher.
That's God's job.

Your job is to trust, trust, trust!

Amen.