

*Life on the Road with Jesus*  
Mark 1:14-20; 2:13-14

I invite you to wander back with me to an earlier time. You're 8 years old, maybe 9 or 10 sitting in your Sunday school class or perhaps it's summer and it's Vacation Bible School.

Can you remember your teacher? Mine is Mr. James Taylor (Yeah that was his name) he's telling stories about this fellow with a name I'm familiar with, only more often I hear it is from my father when he is excited or mad about something!

One of those stories is about this fellow and these four fishermen. I watch as Mr. Taylor carefully places the paper figures on the faded green fabric. Remember?

This Jesus fellow as I recall had a beard and he was taller than the fishermen. Walking along the beach one day he called out to them. They just dropped their nets on the beach and went off with him. I don't know if we were ever told where they went but it certainly must have been an adventure! The sort that Bilbo Baggins went on I suppose.

I don't know about you but as time went on, I heard fewer and fewer stories about this tall man with a beard. Oh sure, at Christmas and Easter we heard about him. But I heard more about people like Moses, King David, and this fellow Saul who became Paul, it was confusing. People in the bible kept getting their names changed!

Years later as adults we studied the letters this fellow S/Paul wrote and a lot of other heady stuff.

Then, due to some rather inexplicable events I was off to seminary where I heard and read much about dead German theologians and modern feminist writers and science's critique of faith. But what happened to that tall, bearded man on the flannel graph seashore?

If I heard about him at all, it seemed that he belonged to the Galilee of the past. Even his words from that talk he gave on the hillside seemed a bit too idealistic to be of any practical use.

Then I took some courses on the Gospels and there was he was again. Except now he seemed to work with the precision and think with the logic of a Swiss reformer. He became one who would be able hold his own in the debates of our time.

While this Jesus was very much at home in the halls of academia, those he hung around with were not. Well, the tax collectors might have found a position in the Seminary Development Office but what about the fishermen? And those lepers, prostitutes, and don't forget the notorious "sinners!" The poor, oppressed, the outcasts, I just couldn't see them sitting in on our lectures on the "anti-Semitic tone found in the gospel of Matthew"!

Fortunately, I was serving a congregation in a rural farming community. So, every Sunday, after a week of seminary studies, I was face to face with people who identified more with the sowers and seed, and those hardworking laborers whether hired early or late of Jesus' parables and, like in all congregations were a scattering of Pharisees, Sadducees, religious legalists, and doubters.

So, what ever became of this Jesus and his friends? Well, as I read the gospels again, especially the gospel of Mark, I found him, right where he was in that very first story; calling those four fishermen to join him on the road.

And I thought that if I'm to join them, I've got some catching up to do.

First, I will need to get my directions straight. Make sure I'm heading in the right general direction. I'll need a good map.

Sometimes maps aren't that easy to read, particularly old maps, maps that were drawn up, say, around 19 centuries ago. The signs and symbols they used made more sense to them back then than they perhaps do for us today. And to

add to our confusion, we have in our possession four different maps: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

Each is different because they were prepared by different people to mark out the road for different communities encountering different situations. These mapmakers were preparing their people to travel through different terrain. Their destination is the same, and they are following the same guide, but the details of their routes vary, for they are setting out from different places with different people. [I'm indebted to the writings of Athol Gill an Australian pastor and scholar for understanding of a map metaphor.]

As Christians we have a tendency to study these maps over and over and that's as far as we go. As much as I claim to be a person of faith, I have to be honest and say, it is much easier, no, it's much *safer* to sit in the comfort of a Bible Study or worship service or to spend time in my study in the preparation of sermons than it is to actually take these maps in hand and step onto the uneven pathways of life as a disciple of that tall, bearded man on the flannel graph. This can be formidable, even terrifying. \*\*\*

What we learn from Mark's map is that our journey's starting point is *Jesus of Nazareth*. Peter and Andrew, James and John are going about their lives. Perhaps they've seen or heard this fellow before; perhaps at the local synagogue where Jesus has a habit of teaching. But Mark presents us with a Jesus walking along the lakeshore where he "sees" these fishermen and calls them from their nets and boats. And just like that, they take to the road with Jesus as his disciples.

This is similar to what rabbis and their followers were like in the time of Jesus. But with a significant twist. In the case of a rabbi, a would-be-disciple initiates the relationship and if the rabbi was impressed, they would be accepted into his "school." But if the rabbi felt the wannabe was not up to the task the student would be rejected.

Not so with Jesus. He sets his eye on someone and issues the call. In a sense the choice is not ours, Jesus initiates the call and with it come all the promises of the kingdom. In other words, discipleship does not depend on us but upon the authority and power of Jesus of Nazareth.

**So, the invitation to follow Jesus is an act of grace.** Consider the call of Levi the tax collector. There was no logical reason this miserable swindler and traitor should even be considered by Jesus. No reason whatsoever! Yet, he is called.

Also, notice in Mark's gospel that Peter and Andrew are fishing; James and John are mending nets; Levi working in the tax office. They were doing their usual occupations. They are not involved in any religious activity; Jesus does not look for them in the temple; they are not praying or studying the scriptures. They are going about their everyday activities.

What does this say? You might conclude that the safest place to avoid Jesus' call is to hang out in the church. He won't be looking for you there!

Seriously though, with Jesus, discipleship clearly depends on the grace of God, not on the worth, or even the potential worth of the one who is called. Levi was not called because of his ability in handling finances – or why was the purse given to Judas!

The ministry of Jesus is an open invitation, and all are welcome. Yet, a distinctive feature of Jesus' ministry is that it is *directed* primarily toward those regarded by the orthodox establishment as beyond the fringes of respectability. Jesus spends time in the rural backwoods' byways of Galilee. His ministry and way is always open to everyone but especially directed toward the oppressed and the outcast and outsiders, for the road of discipleship is an invitation to the ministry of grace and love.

This grace, this love evokes, demands, and makes possible a radical response to the call of Jesus. **The demand is unconditional and the response is All-embracing.**

When Jesus issues a call there can be no delay, no half-hearted response. Jesus will tell travelers of his road, “Don’t look back. Let the dead bury the dead.” and so forth.

While it is grace it is not without cost. For me it is grace because it offers me new life here and now as much as hereafter. But it is costly because it runs counter to so many of my dreams, my ambitions, my desires and, of course, my comfort zones!

Is it worth it? Am I worthy of it?

Well, the answer to the second question is “No” I’m not, but that doesn’t matter. It is not up to me; it is up to Jesus!

As far as the first. . . “Is it worth it?” It must be. People have been taking to this road for centuries. But there is only one way us to know for sure, step onto the road!

Let us then, if you are up to it, take to the road, following that tall man with a beard and long robe who once stood on the shore of the Sea of Galilee and called his first disciples to follow him. The road will lead uphill through terrain which may be strange for some of us. Sometimes it will lead us into murky swamps or along rocky rutted paths.

And unfortunately, the world may judge us by the company we keep.

But if we are following the carpenter from Nazareth, it will be an exciting trip – a journey full of hope, for us and for all humanity!