

“Traveling Light as Bearers of the Light”

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”

Rick Steves is a well-known travel author and host of several travel programs on PBS (he is also a Lutheran and has produced many videos for the church, including *Opening the Door to Luther* which I show my classes every Reformation). He has entitled many of his programs “Europe Through the Back Door,” encouraging his readers and viewers to focus their energies not only on the popular tourist destinations in Europe but on places that are less crowded and offer more authentic experiences of European life and culture. One of his tips on traveling this way is to “travel light,” to not have heavy luggage drag a traveler down while they are walking along the back alleys and cobblestone streets of the continent. Stating that “*you will never meet a traveler who, after five trips, brags: ‘Every year I pack heavier,’*” Steves offers advice to travelers based on his decades of experience traveling throughout Europe while “*packing smart and traveling light*”:

- “You will walk with your luggage more than you think you will. Before flying to Europe, give yourself a test. Pack up completely and walk around your house or block. Or practice being a tourist in your hometown for an afternoon. Fully loaded, you should enjoy window shopping. If you can’t, stagger home and thin things out.”

Rick Steves’ advice to “pack smart and travel light” can be applied to many circumstances in addition to European travel. Packing light is helpful for students who may find that a heavy backpack can become a burden when going to school, and for hikers the importance of lightening one’s load can make the difference between a hike that is enjoyable versus one that can become burdensome and even dangerous. At a time when gas prices have increased, lightening the load in one’s car can increase the fuel efficiency of the vehicle. For anyone who has ever flown in a small airplane, the weight limit is critical for the plane’s ability to take off and get to its destination safely; even on larger planes, weight limits are imposed on luggage for the safety of those who board the flight. In the words of Antoine de Saint-Exupery, “*he who would travel happily must travel light.*”

Among Jesus' instructions to his disciples was the importance of traveling light as they follow their Lord on his journeys. His invitation to the fishers on the shores of the Sea of Galilee to *"follow me, and I will make you fish for people"* (Matthew 4:19) meant that they had to leave everything behind to follow him, lest the burden of their responsibilities weigh them down as they followed Jesus. When Jesus commissions seventy followers and *"sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go"* (Luke 10:1), he instructed them to travel light, to *carry no purse, no bag, no sandals"* (10:4). When a young man approaches Jesus with the intention of becoming his disciples, Jesus sees that his possessions will weigh him down and prevent him from following our Lord; so, he instructs the young man to *"sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."* (Matthew 19:21). Unlike his other disciples who accepted Jesus' teaching on traveling light, *"when the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions."* (19:22).

Today's Gospel lesson contains another teaching of our Lord inviting his followers into a life that included traveling light. The lesson begins with Jesus expressing his frustration over the misperceptions that are being expressed about himself and John the Baptist as well as the resistance to his visions of God's way. In the verses leading up to the beginning of today's Gospel reading, the identity of both Jesus and John is made clear: Jesus is the expected one *"who is to come"* (11:14), and John is the final messenger promised by God *"who will prepare your way before you"* (11:10). But the people of his time cannot discern this revelation in their midst, so Jesus's lament begins with the question *"to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another."* (11:16). In the Bible, the phrase "this generation" refers to an unfaithful generation, calling to mind the wicked generation of Noah's day as well as the faithless generation of Israel that was denied entrance into the promised land:

- "The LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart." – Genesis 6:5-6.
- "When the LORD heard your words, he was wrathful and swore: 'Not one of these – no one in this evil generation – shall see the good land that I swore to give to your ancestors'" – Deuteronomy 1:34-35.

Jesus likens the people of "this generation" to children who refuse to go along with the rules of the game, a proverb that alludes to village life in Galilee: *"We played the*

flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.” (11:17). According to customs among children, boys invited their companions to sing at weddings and girls sang laments at funerals, inviting their friends to mourn. Jesus uses the proverb to refer to the ministries of himself and John; here, sounding the flute refers to the call of Jesus, while the singing of a dirge represents the ascetic witness of John (“*Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, ‘Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?’*” 9:14). The disagreeable playmates who refuse to dance or mourn are the crowds who declined both the invitation of Jesus as well as the penitential summons of John; “*whether they are foolish, immature, or haughty, they choose to be hardhearted for the sake of hardheartedness*” (Matt Skinner). When John the Baptist came “*neither eating nor drinking*” (11:18), engaging in no celebratory feasting, some people thought him exceedingly strange and concluded that “*he has a demon.*” The gaunt and ascetic figure of John, whose “*message of coming judgment was too threatening, and whose lifestyle too unworldly for the sophisticates of his generation*” (M. Eugene Boring), was dismissed as deranged and demonic. But when Jesus came in meekness, announcing the peaceable kingdom of unconditional love and forgiveness and celebrating the goodness of life as “*the Son of Man [who] came eating and drinking*” (11:19), he was dismissed as not being “*spiritual*” enough and accused of being “*a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!*” This accusation is reminiscent of the accusation in Deuteronomy in which parents bring their rebellious son before the elders of the community and declare that “*this son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a glutton and a drunkard*” (Deuteronomy 21:20). Citing this passage suggests that this is more than an insult: Jesus is being depicted as a rebellious Israelite worthy of the sentence in Deuteronomy in which “*all the men of the town shall stone him to death*” (21:21). Jesus in their eyes is “*one who should be executed in order to purge evil from the midst of the covenant community*” (Boring). In the end, nothing could please this “*faithless generation*” who turned their backs on both fasting and feasting, “*for they wanted nothing to do with the wisdom of the Messiah and his forerunner.*” (Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri). While Jesus laments the hardheartedness of the people in their rejection of both himself and John, he ends by declaring that “*wisdom is vindicated by her deeds,*” that both John and Jesus have vindicated the heavenly Wisdom by faithfully living out their prophetic mission and message.

- “The question of Jesus’ identity cannot be dealt with apart from the question of Jesus’ place in the saving history. As the Christ, Jesus is not merely a great individual, but the fulfillment of the promises and presence of God in Israel, the one who stands at the turn of the ages. Thus the question of Jesus’ identity cannot be dealt with apart from its context. This context includes the whole

of Israel's history, including John the Baptist, the prophets, and the Jewish people." – Boring.

While Jesus' message has been rejected by some, Jesus rejoices that it has found acceptance by others that give Jesus sufficient reason to offer praise and thanksgiving to God. Using the form of a Jewish prayer of thanksgiving, Jesus praises the "*Father, Lord of heaven and earth*" (11:25) for the favours the Lord has bestowed on God's people ("*Tobias parted from Raguel with happiness and joy, praising the Lord of heaven and earth, King over all.*" – Tobit 11:13). Jesus offers his prayer to the "Lord of heaven and earth" "*because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will*" (11:25-26). Thanks to God's gracious and elective will, these "little ones" who form the community of Christian disciples have come to know more about Jesus than those who are "the wise and the intelligent." Jesus' reference to "infants" is not a glorification of ignorance, since Matthew elsewhere regards wisdom and understanding as positive attributes of discipleship ("*Keep awake, therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour*" – 25:13). Those who recognize Jesus as the divine messenger do so not on the basis of superior religious knowledge or shrewdness, but by revelation, as the gift of God to those who are open and unpretentious. The "little children" are the ones to whom the divine revelation is given as sheer grace; "*they are the recipients of grace that comes from the Father in heaven*" (Mitch and Sri).

- "For this is the book that makes all wise and clever people fools, and can only be understood by simple people, as Christ says. Therefore let go of your own thoughts and feelings and esteem this book as the best and purest treasure, as a mine full of great wealth, which can never be exhausted or sufficiently excavated. Thus you will find the divine wisdom that God presents in the Bible in a manner so simply that it damps the pride of clever people and brings it to nothing." – Martin Luther, *Table Talk*.

Jesus shifts from his prayer to the Father to a statement to his listeners regarding his divine authority, knowledge delivered to him directly from the Father, in contrast to the scribes and rabbis whose tradition is on the human level alone: "*All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.*" (11:27). Jesus possesses teaching authority that ranks him above Moses ("*The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet.*" – Deuteronomy 18:15). At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew reports that "*when Jesus had finished*

saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught as one having authority, and not as their scribes.” (7:28-29). Jesus displays healing authority to cure sickness and cast out demons (*“Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.”* (4:23) and is vested with spiritual authority to forgive the sins of others (*“But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins – he said to the paralytic – ‘Stand up, take your bed and go to your home.’ And he stood up and went to his home. When the crowds saw it, they were filled with awe, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to human beings.”* 9:6-8).

- “Jesus remains nevertheless authorized by God, whom he calls his ‘Father,’ to reveal God to the world ... Jesus’ words here communicate resolve and confidence. He will be known, and the good news he proclaims will come to fruition.” – Skinner.

Jesus is the beloved Son who is on intimate terms with the Father, through whom *“all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.”* (28:18).

The final section of this reading presents an invitation from Jesus as the embodiment of divine Wisdom (*“For she is an initiate in the knowledge of God and an associate in his works.”* – Wisdom of Solomon 8:4), calling on all who are burdened to *“come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”* (11:28). The burdens that Jesus had in mind were not the physical burdens that people often had to carry in their lives and work, but the burden of religious obligation imposed by the scribes and Pharisees, which Jesus understood as a barrier to communion with God (*“They tie up heavy burdens hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them”* (23:4). In the Old Testament and Jewish tradition, “yoke” was a common metaphor for servitude and obedience (*“Now, whereas my father laid on you a heavy yoke, I will add to your yoke. My father disciplined you with whips, but I will discipline you with scorpions”* – 2 Chronicles 10:11). In contrast to the rabbinic custom of speaking of the “yoke of the Torah” or the “yoke of the Kingdom,” Jesus speaks of his yoke and invites his followers to *“take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”* (11:29). The yoke of Jesus is not an invitation to a life of ease, but deliverance from the artificial burdens of human religion, which Matthew sees as a barrier to the true fellowship of the kingdom of God. Those who take the yoke of discipleship upon themselves will also commit themselves to *“learn from me,”* as learning is an important aspect of discipleship (*“Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy,*

not sacrifice. For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.” – 9:13). Like the divine Wisdom and like God in addressing Moses, Jesus offers “rest which is not mere ease but a synonym for salvation, associated with the kingdom of God and eternal life.

- “Draw near to me, you who are uneducated, and lodge in the house of instruction ... Hear but a little of my instruction, and through me you will acquire silver and gold.” – Sirach 51:23, 28.
- “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.” – Exodus 33:14.
- “And I heard a voice from heaven saying, ‘Write this: Blessed are the dead who from now on die in the Lord.’ ‘Yes,’ says the Spirit, ‘they will rest from their labours, for their deeds follow them.’” – Revelation 14:13.

The ‘yoke’ of Jesus is the call to discipleship, to learn from Jesus not only by heeding his words but by imitating his life. The ‘yoke’ of discipleship is not effortless, but neither is it an exhausting burden. It is “easy” and “light” because we do not bear it alone but in the presence of the Holy Spirit who enlightens and empowers us to “*accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine*” (Ephesians 3:20).

- “The passage closes with an invitation from the one who is himself meek and lowly in heart, an invitation to all who know themselves to be burdened and in need of salvation, an invitation to learn and become Jesus’ disciples. Those who hear the invitation will know that they have the responsibility to answer the call, and when they do, they will understand that they must praise God who has given them this gift of revelation.” – Boring.

While Rick Steves’ advice on packing smart and traveling light offers travelers freedom from the burden of overpacked luggage, he does not say that there are no items that we must carry on our journeys. There are the essentials of clothing, shoes, medications, identification, phones and chargers, and essential items that we must carry, even if they are light. Jesus’ invitation to cast the unnecessary burdens placed upon us on him so that we might shoulder the yoke he places upon us means that we must heed the call of the apostle to “*lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith*” (Hebrews 12:1-2). The yoke of Jesus is the call to discipleship, to be the apostolic church that continues to bear the good news of Jesus Christ to the world. It is a serious burden but not a heavy one, for it is a burden that is borne for us by the Holy Spirit and by our Saviour who had promised that “*I am with you always, even to the end of the age*” (Matthew 28:20).

- “The relief Jesus brings is not freedom from all obligations and responsibility. It is a promise of a way that brings freedom – a life of connection to God that leads to liberation of oneself and one’s neighbours ... The way of Christ is a way of imitating Jesus. He won’t ask us to do anything he won’t, and Matthew indicates that what he likes doing the most is delivering blessings to those who find themselves downtrodden and disadvantaged. You’ll find him there, among the burdened.” – Skinner.

Jesus call his disciples to travel light so that we might bear the light of Christ to others, to cast off any burdens that weigh us down or hold us back so that we might fulfill the task the Lord has placed upon our shoulders: “*to proclaim the mighty acts of him who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light.*”

We travel light so that we might be bearers of the light, “*the light that shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*” (John 1:5).

Amen.