

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: BREATHLESS

(studies in the Gospel of Mark)

Your Choice: Sideline or the Field of Play

(Mark 6:1-29)

Study #10

Introduction: Aspiring fire fighters, all...

I don't know if you have heard about the little boy who wanted to fight fires? It's not an unusual dream for little boys, but this little boy's dream was different. It stuck.

The dream never died. It stayed alive. All he could think about throughout his childhood was the thrill of hearing the siren, the deep rumble of the racing fire-engine.

Deep in his heart was a longing to someday be able to help people and to save them from the ravaging grasp of a fire. His was not a mere childhood fantasy. This was the unmistakable call of destiny.¹

Then, when he was old enough - a dream come true! - it appeared that his dream would come true. He was accepted to fire-fighting school!!

Toward the end of our time this morning we'll find out where the little boy's dreams took him.

Before that, though, we'll see three Gospel stories that, taken together, give us an accurate and powerful picture of what moving from the sidelines to the risky and exciting life of discipleship looks like.

When we left Jesus last He had just healed a woman of a twelve year hemorrhage and had raised a little girl from the dead. All of this happened on one busy day in Capernaum, the seaside base of operations for Jesus' life and ministry.

As we continue in Mark's Gospel we watch as He leaves Capernaum and travels southwest to His hometown of Nazareth.

Jesus: Rejected at Home (vv. 1-6)

Coming Home (v. 1)

Capernaum to Nazareth (v. 1a)

[1a Jesus went out from there and came into His hometown...

Nazareth was located about twenty five miles from the Sea of Galilee (which seems longer when we remember that He had to walk every step of the way).

Jesus would have used the major trade route leading from the Sea to Gennesaret to Magadan to Nazareth. And, in moving from Capernaum to Nazareth, Jesus was moving from one small village to an even smaller, less noteworthy village.

At the most there would have been five hundred people living in Nazareth in the days of Jesus. The town isn't even mentioned anywhere in the Old Testament.²

There were royal cities in the area. Political rulers had built the magnificent cities of Sepphoris and Tiberias nearby. Nazareth couldn't hold a candle to the grandeur of these cities.

¹ With gratitude to The Wittenburg Door magazine, 1976

² Nor does Josephus mention it, nor do any of the extra-biblical writers in the Talmud. No church was built in Nazareth until the time of Constantine.

The journey took Jesus from the heart of Jewish territory to a region that nearly bordered the land of the hated Samaritans. And, of course, Jesus had His disciples in tow.

Have disciples, will travel (v. 1b)

[1b]...and His disciples followed Him.

It wasn't unusual for a rabbi to travel with his disciples. And, from the time of their choosing, everywhere that Jesus went, the twelve were sure to go.

But Mark wants to make sure that we know the disciples were with Him on this trip, because what happens in Nazareth was to form an integral part of their training as disciples.

When they all rolled into town, Jesus, having gained some notoriety since leaving town, was invited to speak on the Sabbath in the city's synagogue.

Homecoming Reception (vv. 2-3)

Teaching in the Nazareth synagogue (v. 2a)

[2a] When the Sabbath came, He began to teach in the synagogue

Jesus would have known the worshippers on that Sabbath and they would have thought that they knew Him. He had grown up with these people. They were His neighbors and His family. It's a friendly crowd. Or so we would have thought.

It turns out, though, that while He was becoming wildly popular throughout northern Galilee because of His victories over demons, disease, and death, among His own people in Nazareth His reception was not that friendly on His home turf.

Questioned by the residents of Nazareth (vv. 2b-3)

Astonished at Jesus' life (v. 2b)

[2b]...and the many listeners were astonished, saying, "Where did this man get these things, and what is this wisdom given to Him, and such miracles as these performed by His hands?"

Jesus had been raised to work with His hands. He never went to rabbinic school. So how did He become such a confident speaker? He seemed to really know what He's talking about when it comes to God and Scripture. There is a wise weightiness behind His words. And then there were the miracles.

None of the residents of Nazareth can make heads or tails out of how Jesus got His stuff. It's good stuff! The people's mouths are wide-open at Jesus' Sabbath-day presentation.

But they quickly recovered and begin to reflect on what they knew to be true of this Guy.

Well-acquainted with Jesus' story (they think) (v. 3a)

[3a] "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? Are not His sisters here with us?"

They knew His line of work. Even though Joseph is not named here, they knew that Jesus had been trained by His father, Joseph to be a carpenter.³

In those days a carpenter was more than (or at least different from) what we think of when we think of "carpenter." The first century carpenter would have worked with all kinds of material - wood, stone, even metal.

There was nothing at all derogatory about referring to Jesus as a carpenter here.

³ John 6:42 seems to assume that Joseph was still alive. Was Joseph considered irrelevant?

In fact, it would have been a point of connection, as the whole town was filled with men who worked with their hands. “*Yep. He’s just like us.*” Meaning that Jesus is not made of the stuff that goes into the making of a Messiah.

They also knew Jesus’ siblings. Mark names the brothers and recognizes that the sisters as being right there with them in the synagogue.⁴

And they knew that Mary was Jesus’ mother. Some have supposed that the reference to Mary and the absence of a mention of Joseph signifies either that Joseph is dead or that it is to emphasize the suspicious nature of the events surrounding Jesus’ birth.⁵

These people would have remembered the stories surrounding His birth, rumors of immorality, an out-of-wedlock pregnancy, hushed up by a shotgun wedding.

Mark summarizes the response of the synagogue crowd toward Jesus.

Offended! (v. 3b)

[3B]...And they took offense at Him.⁶

Rather than embrace the home-town boy made good, they distanced themselves from Him and were suspicious. They were put off by Him and their amazement is not the amazement of faith, but of rejection.

An old proverb nicely summarizes the response of the crowd here, “*Familiarity breeds contempt.*”

Another old proverb fits even better, at least according to Jesus.

⁴ We know James and Judas from elsewhere in the New Testament. James, who wrote the book by the same name, was an early leader in the church (see Acts 15). Judas probably wrote the little New Testament book, “Jude”.

⁵ Nowhere in Mark’s Gospel is there any hint that Jesus was born of a virgin. Mark never denies this cardinal Christian truth, but He never asserts it, either.

⁶ The general disrespect with which Jesus was treated by the residents of Nazareth speaks of a possible insinuation of illegitimacy.

Dismissed by those who thought they knew Him (vv. 4-6a)

A proverbial truth (v. 4)

[4] Jesus said to them, “A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and among his own relatives and in his own household.”

Prophets and statesmen and authors are often well-respected abroad; at home, not so much.

Jesus was setting the world on fire everywhere else, but not here in Nazareth. And the result of the faithlessness of His friends and family was a very limited display of the power of God.

Limited power (v. 5)

[5] And He could do no miracle there except that He laid His hands on a few sick people and healed them.

In Mark’s Gospel Jesus is portrayed in unapologetically human ways. While never denying that He is the Son of God, Mark shows Jesus walking the same roads that peasants and tax-collectors walked, facing the same weariness others faced, and feeling disappointment and fear.

He even knew firsthand the inability to influence His own family and hometown friends to exercise faith. Mark even tells us that in the absence of **their** faith, **He** was not free to exercise His miraculous powers.

Sure, there were some healings, but nothing noteworthy. All small-time stuff. And we are left with no doubt as to the reason for the lack of miracles.

Amazing unbelief (v. 6a)

[6a] And He wondered at their unbelief.

If you ever are amazed at the lack of faith of people you know, know that you are in good company. Jesus was equally amazed. He had hoped for better from people in His hometown.

Sometimes you will come across people who have been exposed to all the good stuff - the stories about Jesus, the evidence of changed lives, answers to prayer - who will choose to disbelieve.

And then, the strangest thing will happen. You'll see people you would never believe would believe, believe, just like that. Gerasene demoniacs will embrace Jesus heart and soul. Avowed atheists and addicts will hear about Jesus and will believe.

No one can predict who will and who will not believe. That's part of the wisdom found in the parable of the soils. We will sow the same seed and see wildly differing responses from people.

Summary: So, Jesus was rejected at home. He, the Son of God, was dissed by people He had grown up with. His family was not supportive. Let's not forget that as we continue...

After this tragic rejection, Jesus left Nazareth, proper, and began to teach in the various villages in the surrounding area - *[6b]...And He was going around the villages teaching.*

This is the third time He has gone on a preaching and teaching and ministry tour. And, of course, He took the twelve with Him.

Very soon after the Nazareth rejection, though, Jesus made a dramatic switch in His ministry strategy. He shifted responsibility for ministry from His shoulders alone, to a shared stewardship with the twelve.

Apostles: Prepared for Rejection on the Road (vv. 7-13)

Commissioned (vv. 7-11)

Summoned to depart (v. 7a)

*[7a] And He summoned the twelve and began to send them out in pairs...*⁷

⁷ Why go out by twos? To establish their testimony (Deuteronomy 17:6; Numbers 35:30) and to have support when times got tough.

The apostles had originally been called to be fishers of men. Now, they get to go fish.

If it was common for a rabbi to travel around with his disciples, it was NOT common for a rabbi to send his disciples out on their own as his representatives.

So, Jesus' decision to send out the twelve was a groundbreaking decision.

And, had He been asking our advice regarding this move, we might have advised Him to hold off a bit. After all, up to this point these guys have not exactly distinguished themselves as the brightest of pupils...

They have demonstrated a lack of faith (4:38 - on the Sea of Galilee), have become impatient with Him (5:31 - for asking who "touched" Him in a crowd), and have even doubted His sanity (3:21).

Ready or not, though, Jesus sent them out to minister in His Name. Clearly, He would rather they fail while taking on risk on the field than sit, soak, and sour on the sidelines.

He summoned them and then He commissioned them while handing out authority.⁸

Authorized with power (v. 7b)

*[7b]...and gave them authority over the unclean spirits*⁹

The twelve are going out as Jesus' representatives and they go out to do the same sorts of things that He had been doing.

They are not being sent out to do some new work, but to carry on the work already begun by Jesus. The point is not innovation, but imitation.

And as Jesus sent them out, He gave them very specific marching orders.¹⁰

⁸ Rabbinic law affirmed that "the sent one is as the man who commissioned him."

⁹ See 3:15 for the same thing.

Instructed (vv. 8-11)

Provision for the road (vv. 8- 9)

[8] and He instructed them that they should take nothing for their journey, except a mere staff—no bread, no bag, no money in their belt— [9] but to wear sandals; and He added, “Do not put on two tunics.”

What Jesus told His disciples to take on this trip was identical to the belongings that God told the Israelites to take on their flight from Egypt in the days of Moses (Exodus 12:11).

By telling the twelve to take a walking stick for stability and for protection against wild animals, sandals for their feet, and a single outer garment, Jesus may be saying that their ministry tour was going to be as important for the advance of God’s Kingdom as was the Exodus.

But Jesus doesn’t just tell the twelve what they are to take. He tells them what they are forbidden to take.

They are to take no food. They are to take no bag/purse/pack. They are to take no money. They are to take no extra clothing.

And the minimalist approach to this particular trip was to teach the twelve to rely on God for the things they would need in the most tangible way possible.

Serving Jesus is all about depending on God. And depending on God is all about going where He sends despite material shortfalls and unanswered questions.

And there were instructions, too, when it came to lodging.

Lodging instructions (v. 10)

[10] And He said to them, “Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave town.

In other words, they were not to go moving around from place to place. They were to accept hospitality wherever it was offered. Oh, it might have been tempting to move from house to house if the second offer was more comfortable than the first. But no. Stay at the first house.

And then Jesus told the disciples what to do when they or their message was rejected.

When rejected... (vv. 11)

[11] “Any place that does not receive you or listen to you, as you go out from there, shake the dust off the soles of your feet for a testimony against them.”

Thy symbolism of the act of shaking the dust off the soles of their feet is significant.

When Jewish travelers to pagan lands returned to Palestine, they would remove their shoes and clothing and shake them out, symbolically disassociating themselves from the uncleanness of foreigners.

For Jesus’ disciples to do the same as they left an inhospitable Jewish village would communicate that the village was behaving in a pagan-ish way and that the villagers would have to answer to God.

To shake the dust off of their feet was to consign the village to God’s judgment.

But the obvious thing to note is the assumption that the twelve would experience rejection.

In one or another of these cities, no door would be opened to them. They would not be well-received. They would be run out of town on a rail.

And thus commissioned, off they went to proclaim the message that Jesus gave them.

¹⁰ The instructions Jesus gives here are not to be considered binding for all time on all believers. They are specific to this mission for these twelve men.

Mission Accomplished (vv. 12-13)

[12] They went out and preached that men should repent. [13] And they were casting out many demons and were anointing with oil many sick people and healing them.

And their mission was a roaring success! They did precisely the same kinds of things that Jesus had been doing.

If we had thought that sending these disciples out on to the field to have real responsibility was too risky, Jesus didn't think that. He knew that His followers would be equipped **as they were stretched**.

His strategy is the same today. He takes half-baked disciples like me and you and sends us out to play with the game on the line and says, *"Trust God."*

As one of my commentaries remarked along these lines, *"No matter how much exegesis, theology, and counseling one has studied, one is never prepared for ministry."* - to which I will say, **"AMEN!!"**

But Jesus sends us out anyway and equips us in the going.

Now, there is one more story to see in our time this morning. Taken together, the three vignettes make a sandwich, with the commissioning of the disciples sandwiched between two stories of rejection.

We turn now to the story of the death of John the Baptist.¹¹

¹¹ There are only two passages in the Gospel of Mark that are not all about Jesus. Both are about John, and both foreshadow Jesus' experience. Both John and Jesus are executed by political tyrants who fear them but vacillate and finally succumb to social pressure. Both die silently as victims of political intrigue and corruption. Both die as righteous and innocent men.

John the Baptist: Rejected for Doing Right (vv. 14-32)

Confusion about Jesus (vv. 14-16)

The thoughts of the people (vv. 14-15)

[14] And King Herod heard of it, for His name had become well known; and people were saying, "John the Baptist has risen from the dead, and that is why these miraculous powers are at work in Him." [15] But others were saying, "He is Elijah." And others were saying, "He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old."

On the heels of the successful mission of the twelve, Jesus was becoming well known. And people in the region around Nazareth were developing their own theories to explain "the Jesus effect."

Mark assumes that we know that John is dead when he tells us that some people thought that Jesus' miraculous powers had transferred to Him from John.¹²

Others were of a mind that Jesus was actually Elijah, the great Old Testament prophet come back from the dead. And still others thought that Jesus was a prophet along the lines of the prophets of ancient Israel.

The Roman-installed ruler of Galilee, Herod Antipas, had his own ideas about who this Jesus guy was.

Herod's thoughts (v. 16)

[16] But when Herod heard of it, he kept saying, "John, whom I beheaded, has risen!"

You would be correct if you are picking up on a more than slightly guilty conscience. The growing reputation of Jesus was an uneasy alert to Antipas that he had not silenced John's message by severing his head.

¹² John never produced any miracles as far as we know. The crowds seem to think of Jesus and John as consecutive voices for God, but they were contemporaries.

Now, identifying which of the many New Testament “Herods” this Herod was would be really confusing as the Herodian family tree was as twisted as an old olive tree trunk!

There are four men named “Herod” in the New Testament. This one is Herod Antipas,¹³ one of the four sons of Herod the Great (the Herod who oversaw the slaughter of the innocents during Jesus’ babyhood).

The old man had a reputation for cruelty and paranoia that his son, Antipas, couldn’t equal. But as one historian has remarked, “*Antipas was as ruthless as his father, just less able.*”¹⁴

Mark drags us into the story with an account of the arrest of John the Baptist.

The Story of John the Baptist (vv. 17-29)¹⁵

Hard feelings (vv. 17-20)

[17] For Herod himself had sent and had John arrested and bound in prison on account of Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip, because he had married her. [18] For John had been saying to Herod, “It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.” [19] Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to put him to death and could not do so; [20] for Herod was afraid of John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he kept him safe. And when he heard him, he was very perplexed; but he used to enjoy listening to him.

¹³ Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great and Malthace, was tetrarch of Galilee and Perea from 4 BC to AD 39.

¹⁴ He totally disregarded Jewish sensibilities, as is evidenced by his marriage to Herodias. Such disregard is also seen in his selection of an ancient cemetery for his capital city, Tiberias. This would have virtually excluded all Jewish settlers, as residing in that place would have made them constantly ritually unclean. See Luke 13:32 where Jesus called Antipas “*that fox*” - shrewd, cunning, malicious.

¹⁵ This is the first of two “passion narratives” (the other being that of Jesus) in Mark’s Gospel. The historical integrity of this narrative has been seriously challenged by some scholars. These challenges are dealt with satisfactorily by William Lane in his commentary.

Herod had convinced the wife of his half-brother, Herod Philip, to divorce Philip and marry him. The woman’s name was Herodias.¹⁶

Of course, Herod’s marriage to Herodias was against God’s Law¹⁷ - and John, a true prophet, told them about it!

Herodias was furious with John the Baptist for calling her and Herod on the carpet for their sin and was eager to get rid of John.

But Herod was a double-minded man. He thought John was interesting to listen to and he knew that John was God’s man.

He couldn’t risk allowing John to remain free, as that would have incensed his wife, but he also couldn’t bring himself to eliminate him, either. So, he simply (and unjustly) had John arrested and thrown in prison.

John languished in jail for a while until, as Mark tells us, a “strategic” day arrived. Clearly, it was strategic for the evil Herodias.

A door of opportunity (vv. 21-23)

[21] A strategic day came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his lords and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee; [22] and when the daughter of Herodias herself came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his dinner guests; and the king said to the girl, “Ask me for whatever you want and I will give it to you.” [23] And he swore to her, “Whatever you ask of me, I will give it to you; up to half of my kingdom.”

Herod threw himself a birthday party and invited all of the great men of Galilee. The guest list was impressive at this state affair. The lords and military commanders were all there. The wealthy and the “Who’s Who” of the region were in attendance.¹⁸

¹⁶ Antipas persuaded Herodias, wife of his half-brother Herod Philip, son of Herod the Great’s third wife Mariamne II to divorce her husband marry him.

¹⁷ See Leviticus 18:16

¹⁸ Don’t think, “Poor Herod. He had to throw his own birthday party.” This was a custom that I saw in Russia more than once where the person having the birthday threw their own party, inviting friends to celebrate with them.

At this party, entertainment was provided. I'm certain that Herodias supplied the main event to get the response from Herod she knew would come.

Herodias had a daughter from a previous marriage (historians tell us her name was "Salome") who performed a dance - no doubt a very sensuous dance - that pleased all the men in attendance.¹⁹

At the end of the dance, Herod swore an oath, promising to give the girl whatever she wanted for having danced such a dance.

Salome went back to her mother to find out what to ask from Herod. Showing that she had already given this some thought, Herodias didn't miss a beat and told her daughter what to ask of Herod.

Wicked opportunism (vv. 24-28)

[24] And she went out and said to her mother, "What shall I ask for?" And she said, "The head of John the Baptist." [25] Immediately she came in a hurry to the king and asked, saying, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter." [26] And although the king was very sorry, yet because of his oaths and because of his dinner guests, he was unwilling to refuse her. [27] Immediately the king sent an executioner and commanded him to bring back his head. And he went and had him beheaded in the prison,²⁰ [28] and brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl; and the girl gave it to her mother.

And just like that Salome went straight back to Herod and told him what she wanted.

¹⁹ Some object to this part of the story, saying that it couldn't have happened that a young girl would perform a sensuous dance at a state dinner. But considering the level of moral depravity in Herod's court, it seems altogether possible, if not downright likely.

²⁰ It is not clear that the executioner Herod commissioned to do the beheading actually beheaded John. He may have simply made sure that the orders were carried out and had an underling do the dirty work.

Feeling like a trapped animal, Herod felt like he didn't have a good option. He had, after all, made a promise. And he couldn't afford to lose face in front of all these rich and powerful people at the party.

So, weak and vacillating Herod gave in and had John the Baptist beheaded.

What a tragedy! The man Jesus once called the greatest man born of woman (Mathew 11:11) is sacrificed to a cocktail party wager.

As soon as word got back to John's disciples, they took action as courageous as anything John had ever done.

A decent burial (v. 29)

[29] When his disciples heard about this, they came and took away his body and laid it in a tomb.

Risking the wrath of Herod, they recovered John's body and carried it away to give it a decent burial.

Conclusion:

Today we've seen the commissioning of the twelve for their very first excursion into ministry. And that excursion is sandwiched between two stories of rejection and faithless response.

Why does Mark string these stories together? He is showing us that following Jesus will sometimes lead to rejection. Following Jesus is risky.

Such knowledge could prompt any of us to sit on the sidelines and never "get in the game." In fact, fear of rejection or failure or outright persecution might tempt any of us to wind up exactly where the little boy wound up who wanted to fight fires.

I told you the first part of the story at the beginning. Now listen to "the rest of the story..."

He wanted to help people, rescue damsels in distress out of burning buildings. And he gained entrance into fire-fighting school so he could be equipped to be the best fire-fighter possible.

For three years he immersed himself in his schooling. He spent hours honing his skills on hoses and pick-axes, sliding down poles and putting on his fire-fighting clothes as quickly as he could. He studied fire-fighting theory long into the nights.

As graduation approached, he realized that the long-awaited moment was within reach. But as he walked across the stage, he wondered if he was really ready.

He voiced his concerns to one of his professors who suggested he travel to Europe to study under one of the greatest fire-fighting theorists of all time.

He applied to and was accepted at a prestigious European graduate school of fire-fighting and exhausted himself for two years in dedicated study. He became one of the most brilliantly educated firemen in the world.

At this graduation he was able to tell anyone how to fight a fire. He was an expert. So expert, in fact, that he was offered a position to teach at one of the most renowned fireman training schools in the country.

He accepted the offer.

And for twenty-five years he taught with distinction and received recognition worldwide.

The little boy died last year an old man. As friends were reading through his memoirs, they came across this passage written while on his deathbed:

“I lie here today reviewing my life. I still remember my dream, my passion to be a fireman. More than anything else I wanted to put out fires... but I realized something today. I have never put out a real fire. NEVER.”

You and I don't want to get to the end of our lives - or the end of this summer - only to realize, “All I really wanted to do was obey Jesus. My heart's desire was always to do His bidding. And I didn't do it.”

That would be to live with a terrible regret. Living a life of no regrets starts by embracing the idea that God is GOOD - and that wherever He leads is the best place to be.

No matter the cost, the rewards of serving Jesus are
ABSOLUTELY WORTH IT!!

So...what part of Jesus' commission to you (Family issues? Evangelism? Honesty? Moral purity? Generosity? Social justice?) has you sidelined out of fear?

TODAY, will you set aside fear and jump into the game, trusting in a very good God who has gone before you.