

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
On the Road Again: Packing for the Trip  
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Ezra 1:5-11; Luke 3:15-22

I couldn't figure out what was going on. Cindy and I were on our way back from visiting her mother in St. Petersburg, Florida, and we were waiting for our flight at gate B30. We had squirreled ourselves away in a far corner of the gate area where we could watch the people boarding the flight before us. The first thing that confused me was that the people were not lined up as they usually were for a Southwest Airlines flight. Rather than being in two short lines, they were in one long line. The second thing that confused me was that the gate agents were calling a single passenger at a time, in Spanish, and looking in their carryon bags. The third thing that confused me was the disagreements between passengers and gate agents that ended up with items being thrown into trash bins. Finally, there was an extended conversation between the agents and one man who said that he was simply not going to fly. The agents kept making sure that he was willing to stay behind rather than give up something he had in his possession. He finally gave in, boarded the flight, and the plane took off. A few minutes later one of the gate agents wandered over to us with a beleaguered smile on her face and said, "It's this way every day." "What do you mean," we asked. "The plane is going to Havana and the Cuban government has very strict rules about what you can and cannot pack in your carryon luggage and bring into the country. And if we allow someone to pack the wrong things, we could be fined up to \$20,000."

I have been thinking about that statement for this past week and have been grateful that I have not been fined \$20,000 every time I packed the wrong things. In fact, let me ask, how many of you have ever packed the wrong things? You packed warm clothes and it turned out to be hot at your destination? Or you packed cool clothes and it turned out to be freezing cold when you arrived? Or you packed items you really didn't need, or forgot ones you did? What this all says is that it is important to carefully think about what you pack before you travel. You need to take what you do need and leave behind what you don't. The same can be said for our journey of faith. Whether we think about it or not we take things with us. We carry all sorts of baggage that may or may not be suitable for a successful trip. So, this morning we are going to let Luke show us what we need to pack in order to have a meaningful and life transforming trip.

The first thing that Luke tells us we need to pack is "the story." I realize that this may seem a bit strange. Why would we need a story and what is the story? First, we need a story because our lives are formed, and our actions are shaped by stories. We are formed and shaped by the stories our families tell, our cultures tell, our workplaces tell, our schools tell, and our faith tells. We are not formed and shaped by facts and figures, but by the stories surrounding those facts and figures. This is so because we are human beings who are not machines but are storytelling and story shaped creatures. Whether it is the ancient Greek myths or modern-day movies, who we are and the choices we make are shaped by the stories that form our personal worlds. In this case, Luke allows us to hear John the Baptist tell not just a story, but "**the story**"; the story that Luke calls the Good News. The story is the Biblical story, which is that there is a creator God who desires the restoration of a fallen world, and that God is about to act decisively to bring about that restoration. This is what Luke means when he writes, "*So with many other exhortations, John proclaimed the good news to the people.*" And this good news story in one form or another makes up the entirety of the Bible. Whether it is God calling Abraham and Sarah, God freeing the people from Egypt, or God bringing God's people back from exile in the book of Ezra, "the story" has shaped God's people. And we need the story because we live in a world with many competing stories;

many competing stories about who can restore this fallen world. Unfortunately, many of those other stories bring destruction rather than restoration. They tear down rather than build up. So, if we are to be part of God's restorative work, then we need to pack "the story", God's story, as we begin.

The second thing we need to pack is "the Spirit." Listen to John the Baptist, "*I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming...he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.*" I realize that this is a bit disconcerting that we are going to be baptized with fire. That sounds like an angry and terrifying thing to have happen. Yet if we listen more closely to the story what we hear is part of John's good news, rather than bad news. What the story tells us is that God's plan for our journey is that we are to be transformed. We are to be made into new people, more loving people, more forgiving people, more compassionate people, and more generous people. And this transformation is to come about through the work of the Spirit and the fire. Why fire? Because what fire does is refine metals and rids the metal of impurities. The work of the Spirit then is to be continually refining us. So how do we pack the Spirit? Well, actually we don't. What we do is leave our lives open to the work of the Spirit. We open ourselves up to God's refining work. We approach our journey with openness because the natural tendency is to assume that at some moment, we have become all we can become, have learned all that we can learn, and can close our baggage and lock it up tight. Packing the Spirit means leaving our luggage open to receive more, to be changed more, to become more. Now, I realize that leaving our luggage open can be messy when things fall out. Don't worry about this because the Spirit is messy. The Spirit wants us to lose what we don't need so the Spirit can fill us with what we do need.

The final thing we need to pack is "the Son." Again, listen to Luke. "*Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."*" What this part of Luke's story tells us is that this God who is acting decisively in the world, who is transforming us along the way, will do so in and through the Son, the beloved. You may have noticed that I used the term, "the Son" and not "the savior." I do so intentionally, at least in this moment, because history is littered with those who claim to be the savior; who claim to be the only one who can save individuals, churches, nations, or the world. And people followed them, often to destruction rather than restoration. So rather than use the language of savior, I will use the language of Luke, even though it is masculine in nature. I do so because what the language represented to its First Century audience, was that Jesus, the child, was in intimate communion with the creator God, the parent. That the parent had trained and taught the child what needed to be done to restore the world. That the child was therefore capable of doing the restoration. And that the faithful child would accomplish the task set before him. So, we need to take "the Son" with us, as our guide and friend.

My friends, we have been invited on an amazing journey, one unlike any other. It is a journey that will not always be easy. It is a journey that will stretch us. It is a journey that will challenge us. But the journey is worth it. My challenge to you then is this, to ask yourselves, have I packed the right stuff for this journey?