

Sermon: How Has the World Changed?
Text: Mark 7:1-8
Date: September 16, 2018
Context: WWPC
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*So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him,
“Why do your disciples not live according to . . . tradition?”*

Mark 7:5

When it comes to the mapping of what is now the lower 48 states, Meriwether Lewis and William Clarke are the greatest explorers in the history of this country. There is no debate about this.

But of course they didn't set out to draw the definitive map of America. Their epic quest was centered around discovering what explorers from three other countries had been looking for off and on for three hundred years -- a water route linking the Mississippi River in the East and the Columbia River in the West.

The reason four separate countries were hunting for this passage is simple.

As the writer Tod Bolsinger has described it, in those days discovering this route would have been like what owning the internet or the interstate highway system is in our time. It would have led to complete economic dominance over an entire continent.

Which is why teams of explorers from England, Spain and France had all been looking for it, and why this newborn country called America also joined the race.

It's also what led to one of Meriwether Lewis's worst moments of the whole expedition. He and a few men had gone ahead of the rest of the Corps of Discovery -- as the group was known -- to scout the headwaters of the river they'd been traveling on.

And sure enough, Lewis found what he believed to be the small spring that serves as the ultimate headwaters of the Missouri River--the second largest river in the country and the main tributary of the mighty Mississippi.

The spring was small. You could straddle the little rivulet that flowed from it, with one foot on either side of the narrow stream. But Lewis was right: the spring was the headwaters of the Missouri, and its cold, crystal clear waters flowed all the way to the Gulf of Mexico.

He leaned down and drank a handful of that clear, bracing water. For him, the spring might as well have been flowing with champagne. Because he thought the hard work was over and that it was time to celebrate.

Because that small spring flowed out of the eastern side of the Lemhi Pass, on what is now the border between Montana and Idaho.

It was a relatively easy hike up to the top of the pass. Lewis reckoned that his men could portage their canoes and their gear up and over it easily within a single day.

Once they cleared the pass, they needed only to find a river that was deep enough to support their canoes and they could then just float all the way to the Pacific. The hard work of paddling upstream since they left St. Louis was now literally behind them.

At least that was Lewis's deep, heartfelt belief. Which is why the sight that greeted him at the top of the pass dealt him such a devastating blow.

There, directly in front of him, stood the Rocky Mountains, a chain of towering snow capped peaks, taller than anything he'd ever seen. Totally unlike the much smaller and more manageable Appalachian mountains with which he was familiar.

Lewis instantly realized he had two big problems. Number one, on the experience side, all of his men, every member of the Corps of Discovery, all of them, were river men, not mountain men.

Second, on the logistical side, they now had to cross the biggest mountain chain in America equipped only with canoes. In case it's not obvious, here's a pro tip: you can't cross mountains with canoes. That is not what canoes are built for.

So, then, what happens when you set out on a journey equipped and prepared for one set of conditions, only to be met by a totally different set of conditions along the way?

What happens when you find yourself traveling by canoe and you come nose to nose with the highest mountain range in North America?

According to Tod Bolsinger, that, in effect, is the challenge facing the church today--a challenge he spells out in great detail in his aptly named book, *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory*.

Drawing on the Lewis and Clark story, the book is centered around a two-part question: when the world around you changes, are you willing to change with it and adapt to it, and if so, how?

Which brings us to our text for today. I'm not a scholar of the ancient Middle East. So I don't know how much the world had changed in the years between the moment Jesus stepped onto history's stage and the scene we read a moment ago.

I do know that he had steadily re-drawn the disciples' map of the world. That when traveling with this guy, everything was new and different and unexpected.

Which is why this particular exchange with the Pharisees is a little ambiguous. I suspect most of us might actually side with the Pharisees in this case, and not with the disciples.

Washing your hands and your food before you eat is good practice. This small example in turn points to the value of tradition, and why maintaining it can be so very important. Because healthy practices can shape us and protect us. They can serve us well, right up until the moment they don't anymore.

And that, I think, is perhaps the larger point in play in this story. And you can hear it quite plainly in the Pharisees' question.

“Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders?”

Because sometimes those traditions, even long-held, deeply beloved traditions, can reach the point where they are no longer life giving. And when that happens, defending and maintaining them can keep us from adapting to a world that is constantly changing all around us.

And that is Tod Bolsinger's point. The church, he argues, is really good at traveling by canoe.

Over the years when the church played a dominant role in American life and culture, we church folks learned how to navigate through the waters of the modern world very effectively.

But now we're staring at a dramatically different landscape than the one we've been paddling through for decades.

It's important to point out that the challenge of adapting to a profoundly changed world is not limited to the church. Businesses and industry of all kinds are also facing the need to adapt to a dramatically different landscape than the one they started out traveling through.

I'll give you just one example. Almost no one under sixty gets their news from television. I know that may sound incomprehensible to those of us who tune into CBS Evening News every night, but it's true.

Where once everyone in America knew who Walter Cronkite was, today people around my age and younger wouldn't be able to pick out the anchor of the nightly news if he or she was standing next to us in an elevator.

Indeed, almost no one under, say, forty, even watches television anymore. At least not on their actual television, or if they do, they certainly don't watch it live.

I would guess there's a good chance many students at Warren Wilson have never seen a live commercial on TV for a Big Mac. Two all beef patties, special sauces lettuce cheese pickles onions on a sesame seed bun? Just not part of their vocabulary.

What does it mean for CBS that fewer and fewer people are watching network television? What does that mean for McDonalds?

Those are big changes, and big questions. And we have our own version of this dynamic.

This congregation has seen a lot of changes over the years. It's been almost five decades ago now, but there was a time when these pews were filled with students.

However much we may miss those days, however much we may long for them to return, they are not coming back.

We all watched in horror as those twin towers that once dominated the New York skyline came crumbling down seventeen years ago this month. And we're still dealing with the aftermath of that one day when the world changed so dramatically.

Our neighbors in the eastern part of this state woke up this very morning to a dramatically changed world, with their streets underwater and their homes flooded.

Some two years ago, on October 16, 2016, we launched our ministry plan. In effect, the plan was meant to serve as a map to guide us into a bright hopeful future.

And while I think we would all agree that it's better to execute such plans than it is to talk about them. It's also worth assessing the progress we're making in realizing our twin goals of discerning who God is calling us to be, and doing what God is calling us to do.

In order to continue doing that effectively, and to make any course corrections or other adjustments that might be necessary to get where we're going, I think it's important to periodically reflect on the conditions through which we are traveling.

This way, if we find we need to swap out our canoe paddles for hiking poles, we can then be sure to make that change before we spend time lugging our canoes up and over the Lemhi pass.

So, as we continue with our sermon series of Living the Questions, that's our question for today: How has the world changed?

I'm going to ask you to take some time to answer it right now.

You can answer this any way you like. Maybe it's personal. How has your specific world changed. A change in your investment portfolio, or your health status. A change in your family -- births or deaths, or a marriage or a divorce, that impact you directly.

Maybe you want to answer it more broadly--how has the world around you changed? The familiar world you've known and assumed would always stay the same . . .