

MEETING JESUS ON THE ROAD

A Lenten Study

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FOREWORD BY BEN BLAKE

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In addition to the group study resources found at the end of each chapter, the authors have provided session introduction videos for group and individual use, which are available at www.youtube.com/@wjkpress.

Introduction

JOURNEYING WITH JESUS

FOR MOST OF HIS MINISTRY, JESUS WAS CONSTANTLY on the move. Theologian Kosuke Koyama once described him as the “three mile an hour God” because he conducted his ministry on foot, walking between the villages of Galilee and eventually to Jerusalem.¹ More often than not, the locations noted in the Gospels are important to the significance of his teaching and healing.

In this study, we will explore Jesus' journey and how it helps us understand what it means to follow him today. Along the way, we invite you to reflect on your own journey through life and faith. We hope that these reflections will help us all consider our own discipleship and that of the faith communities to which we belong.

When we consider Jesus' journeys, we soon discover that there are two rather different versions. According to Mark, the first Gospel to be written, the story of Jesus is divided into three parts: the ministry in Galilee; the journey to Jerusalem; and the last week of Jesus' life. Mark's version is especially active. As the shortest Gospel, Mark is easy to read in one sitting. In fact, we encourage you to do so as you set out on this journey. You will discover that one of Mark's favorite words is *immediately*. There are at least twenty-seven movements from one location to another. The reader is left with the sense of an almost frenetic pace of activity.

It all begins with Jesus' journey from his hometown in Nazareth south to find John and be baptized by him in the Jordan River. From there, the Holy Spirit leads him into the desert

wilderness to wrestle with his call. After returning to Nazareth, Jesus makes his home base in the village of Capernaum on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee. Gathering a group of disciples around him, he travels around the villages of the region, teaching, healing, and proclaiming that the reign of God is at hand. Along the way, he encounters rich and poor; people suffering with illnesses that plagued both body and spirit; women and men hungry for bread and for the bread of life. He met them all with compassion. He brought them hope.

Then Jesus tells his followers that he must journey to Jerusalem, where he will encounter even more opposition from religious authorities than he has already. That opposition will end with his execution, but death will not be the end. Along the way of this journey, which on foot would take at least a week, Jesus continues to try to help his followers understand what following him means.

Finally, Jesus and his followers arrive in Jerusalem. Mark's story slows down dramatically as we follow the events of the final days of Jesus' life and his death. Death was not the end of

the journey, however, either for Jesus or for his friends and followers. According to Mark and Matthew, the disciples are instructed to return to Galilee, where it all began and from there, at least according to Matthew, to go out into all the world and build new communities of disciples.

While Matthew and Luke follow Mark's general outline, the Gospel of John takes a different approach. Here, Jesus travels back and forth between Galilee and Jerusalem. Jesus was there more than once for Passover. Thus, it is John's Gospel that suggests that Jesus' ministry occurred over a three-year period. Some have speculated that Jesus had both Galilean followers as well as another group of followers in or around Jerusalem, perhaps based in the home of Martha, Mary, and Lazarus of Bethany. These differences should not concern us too much, however. The Gospels are not history in the modern sense. They are theologies written in story form. They are designed to convey the truth about Jesus not in the form of concepts or propositions but in the form of narratives. Like any other narrative, they invite us to connect these stories with our own. Because it is

God's story, it invites us to find the purpose of our lives.

Journeying has been at the heart of Christian experience since the very beginning. In the years following the resurrection, the disciples set out to share the good news in towns and cities far and wide. Peter, Paul, and others traveled to places where there were Jewish communities around the Mediterranean region. They went to Antioch and Damascus in Syria; to Ephesus and other cities in what is now Turkey; and to Philippi, Thessalonica, Corinth, and Athens in Greece. Eventually, both Peter and Paul ended up in Rome, where they, too, would be put to death. This much we know from the New Testament, but there are rumors about the exploits of other disciples. According to legend, Thomas journeyed across the ocean to India to what is now the province of Kerala. A Christian community, called the Mar Thoma Church, remains to this day. Ever since, Christians have followed the call to preach the gospel and serve others in the spirit of Jesus in their own communities and around the world.

Early on, pilgrimage became a part of Christian practice for many believers. In keeping with the Jewish practice of journeying to Jerusalem for special observances, pilgrimage can be defined as the journey to a place where God revealed Godself in the past and where God can be encountered in the present. Initially, Christians made pilgrimages to the tombs of martyrs to commemorate their sacrifice on behalf of Christ. Later, after the Emperor Constantine officially recognized Christian faith, Christians began making pilgrimage trips to the Holy Land in search of the places where Jesus lived, died, and was raised from the dead. Constantine's own mother, Helena, made such a journey and recorded her experiences in a diary. She is credited with establishing churches commemorating the location of Jesus' birth, suffering, and death.

Centuries later, pilgrimage became a popular practice in Europe, especially to holy sites associated with the apostles or later saints. The most famous of these is Santiago de Compostelo in Spain, where, according to legend, the remains of the apostle James are interred. For those who could not make a literal pilgrimage, the

practice of meditative walking on a path called a labyrinth was developed. Today, churches and retreat centers of many denominations have installed or built labyrinths that encourage people to rediscover walking as a practice of prayer.

Finally, the concept of being on a spiritual journey has become a common way to describe the life of faith. The heart of this metaphor is that faith is not a thing that one either has or doesn't, nor is it a set of beliefs about God. Rather, faith is a relationship with God that grows and changes over a lifetime. In the season of Lent, the followers of Jesus are encouraged to set out on the journey once again to discover him and ourselves as his people. Along the way, we are invited to rediscover the many different forms that discipleship may take. We are invited to encounter new resources for deepening the journey. You may find yourself discerning a new path for your life or being called to deeper times of prayer. You may be challenged to come alongside poor and marginalized people in their struggles for justice and life. You may find yourself drawn to reach out to those who are lonely or in a time of grief. There is almost no end to

the ways in which we can encounter God and serve in Christ's name.

This study is designed to take individuals or groups from the First Sunday in Lent to Easter. Following the pattern of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), we begin with the announcement of Jesus' ministry in Galilee. We follow him as he instructs his followers (then and now) on the meaning of discipleship. We arrive on Palm Sunday and follow Jesus as he journeys to suffering and death. We come to the end of the journey at Easter, only to discover that it is really the beginning. At the end of each chapter, there are questions for reflection. These can be used for personal reflection by individuals or as discussion starters for groups. Each week's chapter also includes a walking prompt to inspire you in active contemplation, reflecting on or paying attention to certain things pertinent to the week's Scripture and theme as you walk around your neighborhood or a park. If mobility is a challenge, sitting somewhere peaceful to reflect on these prompts will be edifying as well.

In this collaborative effort, we have visioned together even as we have split the task of writing.

As we have journeyed together in this project, we have had other vital companions. We are grateful to our friend Ben Blake for his reflections on walking the camino. We are, as always, grateful to Jessica Miller Kelley of Westminster John Knox Press for her patience, good counsel, and generous assistance.

Chapter 1

ON THE ROAD TO MINISTRY

READ: MATTHEW 4:12–17, 23

Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

“Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,
on the road by the sea, across the Jordan,
Galilee of the gentiles—
the people who sat in darkness
have seen a great light”

. . . Jesus went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

—Matthew 4:12–16a, 23

ESPECIALLY IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK, IT SEEMS that Jesus was nearly always on the move: back and forth across the Sea of Galilee, moving from one village to the next in the region, forays outside Jewish territory, up mountains, out into the wilderness, and even walking on water. Jesus is on the move! Unlike some rabbis who set up schools and waited for students to come join them, Jesus traveled constantly and gathered followers as he went. As we set out on this journey with Jesus, we begin by considering the location of his ministry. This invites us to consider our own location and the impact that location has on who we are and what we are called to do.

All four Gospels agree that Jesus came from Galilee. According to the Synoptic Gospels, he conducted almost all his ministry there. But why Galilee? There are several possible answers. Perhaps he simply wanted to return home to where he had lived and worked all his life. Perhaps he thought people would be more receptive there. Perhaps he wanted to be away from Jerusalem, the center of wealth and power.

Matthew has a specific theory. In describing this move, he quotes Isaiah 9:1–2. Casting Jesus' story as the fulfillment of prophecy is a hallmark of Matthew's Gospel. This is the seventh such reference, and it's only chapter 4! Galilee is the northern region of Israel, bounded today by Lebanon and Syria on the north and the kingdom of Jordan on the east. Approximately twelve hundred years before Jesus, this region became home to the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali, two of the twelve tribes named for the sons of the patriarch Jacob. These tribes occupied the northern border of Israel, and like all inhabitants of the borderlands, they interacted with neighboring cultures and people.

Fast forward to the eighth century BCE. The northern kingdom of Israel, of which these tribes were part, became enmeshed in a deadly conflict. They, along with other small, regional powers, rebelled against the expanding Assyrian Empire, a notoriously brutal regime located in what is now northern Iraq. Their defeat paved the way for a full onslaught by the Assyrians, and in the year 723, the northern kingdom of Israel was effectively destroyed. The leaders

who were not killed were taken captive into exile. The prophet Isaiah was active at this time in Jerusalem, notably convincing the king of Judah not to join the rebellion against Assyria! Looking into the future, Isaiah proclaims that these devastated people of Zebulun and Naphtali who walk in the darkness of devastation and defeat will see great light. These words have echoed down the millennia; we read them today usually at Christmas because of what follows in Isaiah 9:6 (KJV): “for unto us a child is born.”

By the time of Jesus, the names of the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali have virtually been forgotten. The region is simply known as Galilee, a boundary territory occupied first by the Greeks and then, during Jesus’ lifetime, by the Romans. Jewish and non-Jewish towns existed side by side. The region is only about ninety miles from Jerusalem, but if you are walking, it is at least a weeklong journey. From the perspective of the religious and political leaders in Jerusalem, this region was the hinterland and more than a little suspect in terms of orthodox religious identity. But this is where Jesus comes from. These are his people. And this is the place

where he engages in ministry: in the land once devastated, among people whose ancestral identity was largely lost.

At the heart of Christian faith is belief that Jesus is the Word made flesh. That in one particular human being, the fullness of God was present in human history. We sometimes call this “the scandal of particularity.” Jesus was a real person who lived in one specific time, context, and culture. He did not speak English (in fact, at the time, English as we know it did not even exist). He spoke a Semitic language called Aramaic that is closely related to Hebrew. He wasn’t educated in the best rabbinic schools or in any school that we know of. He spent fifteen to twenty years of his life as a carpenter, some combination of furniture maker, builder, and general contractor. And he was from a town about which the educated, sophisticated class said, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” But Galilee and the surrounding area was the region where he spent his life: where he preached and taught and healed, and where he inspired hope and planted a vision of God’s kingdom come into the real lives of real people.

Back in the 1960s, the then-United Presbyterian Church was debating the text of what would become the Confession of 1967. Several sentences sparked fierce debate. One line that elicited a range of strong emotion was this: “Jesus, a Palestinian Jew, lived among his own people and shared their needs, temptations, joys, and sorrows.”¹ Many were confused; some were outraged. How could you call Jesus a “Jew”? After all, some asked, wasn’t he the first Christian? Others were perplexed by the term *Palestinian*, given the modern distinctions we make between Israel and Palestine. The authors intended this as a simple statement of fact: Jesus was born, lived, and died a Jew, a son of the covenant. Christianity is what came after the resurrection, not before it. Jesus was a Jew who lived in Palestine, which at that time was a territory defined and controlled by the Roman Empire. And he lived in a region that had a long collective memory of death and defeat.

So I wonder what we make of Galilee today. Where is Galilee in our experience? In the late 1970s, I served a Presbyterian church in downtown San Antonio, Texas. While there, I met a

remarkable Roman Catholic priest and prominent local leader by the name of Virgilio Elizondo. He was a brilliant man, and his roots lay deep in the barrio—the Mexican American, poverty-stricken west side of San Antonio. Elizondo grew up in a grocery store, the son of immigrant parents. He once said, “I was raised in a neighborhood where almost nobody thought I would amount to much or thought I would make it out.”

When I knew him, he was the pastor of the Catholic cathedral and had just founded the Mexican American Cultural Center as a way to help his community claim and celebrate their rich cultural heritage. He went on to author several books, but the most influential was *Galilean Journey*. Reflecting on the Galilee of Jesus’ day, Elizondo saw his own community: poor, hard-working people who were looked down on by the dominant culture, of whom little was ever expected, and with whom even less was shared. The “scandal of particularity did not begin with the cross,” Elizondo wrote. “It began with the historical-cultural incarnation of God’s Son in Galilee.”²

Not long ago, a Lutheran pastor in Bethlehem said that if Jesus were to be born this year, he would be born in Gaza. Or Jesus would be born in Ukraine, or in Sudan, or anywhere people walk in darkness, where people are in danger, where they carry a memory of ancestral devastation and defeat. Most of us are not strangers to darkness of one kind or another either. It may not be in the form of poverty or violence, but it could take the form of depression or grief. It could be the devastation of dreams shattered by disease. It may be loss of meaning or hope or anything to look forward to. But as Isaiah saw so long ago, it is in the darkness that God intends light to shine and hope to be born.

Galilee is also a boundary territory. Back in Jesus' day, there were no lines drawn on maps or security checkpoints or border crossings. There were regions where one group or another predominated, but there were mixed areas as well. Galilee was Jewish territory, but other peoples lived nearby. Scattered around were cities built as outposts by Greek and Roman occupiers. Galilee was a region where people who were

different butted up against one another. And it was the region that saw the first test of Christianity's most important insight.

The test was this: Was Jesus' mission to his fellow Jews only, or were the others to hear and receive it as well? Was the light that God promised to Israel to be a light for Gentiles too? Along the way, we will hear Jesus say that he was sent to the lost sheep of Israel, but then we see him extend healing to the others: the Syrophoenician (or Canaanite) woman; lepers who were Samaritans; and a man possessed by a demon from the Gentile side of the Sea of Galilee. Matthew's Gospel shows us in narrative form what Paul preached some decades earlier: in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave or free, male or female, for all are one in Christ (Gal. 3:28).

Our passage in Matthew sets the scene for Jesus' ministry. As Jesus begins these years of moving around Galilee, we are invited to reflect on where we live. Where are you located, and how does that shape who you are, what you think, and what you value? Where is your congregation or faith community located for ministry? What is the darkness in which you live that

longs for light? What layers of darkness, despair, and defeat shape the lives of your neighbors? And what about the others? Who are the others you are tempted to dismiss, despise, or simply ignore?

When Jesus came home to Galilee, his message picked up where John the Baptist left off: “Repent. Turn around. Change your hearts and lives, because the kingdom of heaven is right here, in your midst, right in front of you” (Matt. 4:17, author paraphrase). All that God has promised—life and hope and peace and joy—is not a promise for some far-off future. It is here and now. Throughout Galilee, he taught them about this promise. And then he showed them what it looked like: he cured every disease and every sickness among the people. And it turns out this healing is not just for some; it’s for everyone.

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