

## “Off the Edge of the Map”

Genesis 12:1-9

The Rev. Dr. Douglas C. Hoglund

The Woodside Church

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We marched in a long black line through the massive doors, between soaring stone columns and scintillating stained glass. Wearing sable gowns and mortarboards we filed past pews filled with parents, grandparents, friends and spouses – eager for the arrival of this day. To the thundering strains of organ and brass, we reached our destination taking our seats in the University Chapel. Yet we, the Princeton Theological Seminary class of 1986 were not at the end of our journey. Here it begins.

Our president, the Rev. Dr. Thomas Gillespie rose to the pulpit and said we were all about to head off into the great unknown.

Today you, the members of the Class of 1986, begin new phases of your life and faith pilgrimages in which you will be called to march off your maps.<sup>1</sup>

He compared us to the Patriarch Abraham. He also marched off his map, Dr. Gillespie said, when he left Ur of the Chaldees (in modern Iraq) to go to the Promised Land under the call of God. The book of Hebrews says

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was to go. Hebrews 11:8

Just like Leif Erickson, Christopher Columbus, Ferdinand Magellan – Abraham and Sarah headed off the edge of their map into the unknown. Then Dr. Gillespie said.

Like Abraham, (many of) you are going out from this Commencement not yet knowing where you are to go. Fewer of you have calls to a particular place of ministry at this point in time than anyone can remember ever being the case before.

In other words, he pointed out how my graduating class had the worst job placement record in seminary history. Of course that wasn't true for me. I landed a job a whole two weeks before graduation. I also learned during the ceremony I won an award – the John Alan Swink Prize in Preaching. I felt pretty superior to my classmates ... until I learned it was the award for the preacher who was most improved.

President Gillespie's point was this: we don't know what the future holds, but we serve the One who holds the future: Jesus Christ. Now, thirty-five years later, I know how a portion of the future turned out. All my classmates eventually did find jobs and marched off their maps - some to the far coast of America, some to the far corners of the world. Being an adventurous and risky person myself, I marched off the edge of New Jersey, reached Bucks County and stopped and I've been here ever since. So far as I can tell, God's plan for me was not to venture into some far off land but to come alongside each of you as you step off the edge of your maps.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas W. Gillespie, “Marching Off Your Maps” Farewell Remarks to the Class of 1986. The Princeton Seminary Bulletin, Vol. VII, No. 3, p. 219.

- Maybe you are walking off the edge into the unknown world of High School or college. It might be smooth sailing or you may be swimming with sharks.
- Maybe you're entering the new world of married life or the rocky wilderness of divorce.
- Maybe you wake up at night and worry about the dark swirling hole of debt that's threatening to pull you down.
- Maybe you're starting a new career or struggling to find a new job. You're carefully navigating through unemployment or wondering what's waiting for you in the great unknown called retirement.
- Maybe you or someone close has just received a scary diagnosis. The doctors can only tell you a little about what lies ahead. How bad, how long, how painful are all big unknowns.
- Every once in a while you wonder what's on the other side when your final day comes and you walk off the edge of the map of life.
- And after the last twenty months of pandemic and pandemonium you wonder if things will ever be normal again.

It's easier to stay on the map, to draw inside the lines, to live where the streets and roads are familiar. A few love the thrill of going over the edge. But most prefer to play it safe - a small risk here or there with plenty of insurance to cushion the fall.

Yet there comes a time, perhaps several times, when life forces you off the map. You can't go back to high school, you've avoided graduating college long enough, you've been let go from work, you bury your spouse. There's no road map for the future – just a blank space. What do you do?

Abraham finds himself in a similar situation. He has plenty of flocks, possessions and servants. He can settle down and live out his years in comfort and ease. There are just three problems. Abraham has no land to leave his children. Abraham has no children. And Abraham is hearing things. Someone keeps calling his name. The voice of a strange God, a God no one else worships, a God no one else chooses, chooses Abraham.

The Lord had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." Genesis 12:1-3

The Lord promises to give Abraham and Sarah land, children and much more. But to receive them, they must march off the map into the great blank beyond. And when they do, here's what they find.

First, **God is Always Ahead of You.** A question I've heard expressed in many different ways is: "Why doesn't God come down and do something about this?" We think God is distracted, disinterested and distant. That's not the way He appears in the Bible. The Lord is

always out in front preparing the way for us. Whenever you step off the map, wherever you go, you can always count on God being there when you arrive. When Abraham and Sarah reach Shechem, Bethel, and the Negev, when they travel the whole length of the Promised Land, God is always there ahead of them. Even when Abraham makes a wrong turn God is still there to redirect him. So don't ask, "How can I get God to bless my plans?" Instead, be on the lookout for God's hand and ask "Lord, what are you doing in this situation and how can I join you?"

Second, **God's Power Starts Where Our Power Stops.** This whole story begins with one brutal fact: Sarah is barren. They can buy land but they cannot produce children. And without children, there would be no great nation. Years later, Sarah is so frustrated, she actually arranges for her servant girl, Hagar, to be with Abraham to produce a child. For some reason, Abraham is okay with this plan. Yet it creates endless misery for all of them. Troubles come when we take matters into our own hands instead of waiting on God. I find again and again the greatest spiritual growth comes not just when we reach the end of our maps but when we reach the end of ourselves. Only when we stop trying to save ourselves, prove ourselves and control ourselves and everyone around us, only when we surrender and lose ourselves to Jesus do we receive God's power to deal with life.

Third, **Be a Blessing.** The Lord says,

You will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you...and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you. Genesis 12:3

When Abraham and Sarah reach the Promised Land the Bible says, "At that time the Canaanites were in the land" (v. 6). Abraham and Sarah live the rest of their lives among people who speak a different language, followed different customs and worshiped different gods. They don't attack them or criticize them. Nor did they become like them. They stay true to the Lord. Twice, Abraham builds an altar and calls on the Name of the Lord. With every year, it seems more and more Canaanites move into the neighborhood. I'm not talking about people from other countries. I'm referring to neighbors who choose not to worship God. We must never attack or criticize. Nor should we become like them. Instead, our role is to be a blessing to them. To give, not take. To lift up not put down. To help not harm and to invite them to know God. The only way we can do that is to keep intimately in touch with God and His people the Church. It's a spiritual law of the universe, when you start to lose touch with God's people, you start to lose touch with God. Be a blessing and we will see more Canaanites come to Jesus. How do we do this?

**Find Your Purpose.** The Bible is the story of lots of ordinary people who were used by God to do extraordinary things. It's a book of imperfect people who became part of God's perfect plan. Abraham and Sarah are not perfect. They have faults. You might say Abraham is a failure. He never possesses the Promised Land. The only real estate he ever owns in the Holy Land is the grave where he and Sarah are buried. He never becomes a great nation in his lifetime. Sarah only has one son: Isaac. Yet they find and fulfill their God-given purpose. God places in them Spiritual Gifts like Faith, Generosity, Leadership. God gives them Passions such as Obedience, Hospitality and Mercy. God uses the tragedies and triumphs of their Story – to mold and shape them for the unique God given purpose He designs them to do. God equips them and calls them. And because they are willing to follow God and walk off the edge of their map, God fulfills this promise "all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Genesis 12:3). From Sarah and Abraham come Jesus – the Savior of the whole world.

What map are you about to walk off? God is calling you to join Him in a future He is preparing for you. This fall I invite you to discover your spiritual GPS. Just as you rely on your phone's GPS to get from point A to B, the Bible offers you a process which identifies your Gifts, Passion and Story. Together, these three reveal your unique God given direction and purpose. Join us at Woodside starting September 26 for GPS – Find Your Purpose through your Gifts, Passion and Story. We'll talk about it in the message on Sunday but the way to get the most out of it is to sign up for a Growth Group doing GPS. You can sign up on the Connection Card, Website or at Fall Fellowship.

It was just another day at the office for Dave Karnes. The accountant made his way to his desk at the Connecticut headquarters of Delotte and Touche. It was just another day. Except that this day was Tuesday, September 11, 2001. When news of the attack on the World Trade Center spread through the office, most of the employees went to stare at the burning towers on the TV. Dave Karnes headed back to his desk to pray. "I'm a born again Christian," he told NPR. "I probably prayed for two hours. And God put it on my heart to go down there."

Karnes was a former Marine Corps Sergeant and a former police officer. He'd worked in a steel mill making girders and he'd worked near the Trade Center and knew them well. He felt his whole life had been preparing him for this day.

Putting on an old Marine Corps camouflage utility and stopping to get a Marine style haircut so he could get through the roadblocks, Dave made his way to the site. But by then, all the rescue workers were ordered off the pile. It was too dangerous. Karnes grabbed another former Marine and sneaked past the perimeter to search.

"We charged in, broke through the wall of smoke and saw the immense debris field and the extreme carnage. The Towers to the right and left were collapsing. Fire burned everywhere. The steel was shifting and some of it was so hot it would melt the soles off your boots." The two men worked their way across, calling out to survivors. The sun was going down. Finally, they passed a giant bronze globe sculpture which survived the attack. Dave Karnes sensed someone was alive nearby. He shouted, "United States Marines. We can hear you. Yell louder!" From an air pocket ten feet down in the debris came two voices. It was Port Authority police officer William Hemeno and Sergeant John McLaughlin. Will Hemeno cried out, "Please don't leave us. Please don't leave us. I have a baby daughter. My wife is 7 months pregnant." Karnes called for help on his cell phone. Together, the teams dug 30 feet down on an angle. They twisted and bent around huge I beams. Dust was in their eyes. Every breath felt like glass shards in their lungs. For four hours they dug with their hands and a pair of handcuffs. Near midnight they pulled Will Hemeno free. By dawn the next day Sergeant McLaughlin was saved. They were the last two pulled from the pile alive.

Dave Karnes listened to God's call that day and gave two families their husbands and daddies back.<sup>2</sup> God is calling you. Are you ready to walk off your map?

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<sup>2</sup> Chris Arnold, All Things Considered, National Public Radio, September 10, 2004. see [www.npr.org](http://www.npr.org).