

“You Can’t Get There From Here”
Genesis 12 to 35
Series: The Story – God Builds a Nation
The Rev. Douglas C. Hoglund

The Woodside Church

January 18, 2015

At my graduation from Princeton Theological Seminary, our president, the Rev. Dr. Thomas Gillespie rose to the pulpit and charted the adventure which lay ahead of us. “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.”¹ He compared us to two great figures from history. The first was, Alexander the Great, the most successful general in history, who conquered every nation from Greece to India before the age of 33. When they reached India they ran out of map. They didn’t know where to go or how to get there. And being men, they were not about to ask for directions.

The other traveling hero went in the opposite direction – from east to west. His name was Abraham. He also marched off his map, Dr. Gillespie said, when he left Ur of the Chaldees (in modern Iraq) and made a journey 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).

Then Dr. Gillespie turned the image on us. “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 that my 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 that I had 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, twenty-nine years later, I know how some of the future turned out. My classmates did find jobs and marched off their maps - some to the farthest coast of America, some to the farthest corners of the world. Being an adventurous and risky person myself, I marched off the edge of New Jersey, reached Bucks County, stopped and I’ve been here ever since. So far as I can tell, God’s plan for me was not to venture into an uncharted blank space on the globe but to come alongside each of you as you step off the edge of your maps.

¹ 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 about to walk off the edge into that unknown world of college. You don't know if it will be smooth sailing or you'll be swimming with sharks.
- Maybe you're preparing to enter 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.
- And 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.

It's easier to stay on the map, to live where the boundaries and borders, the streets and roads are familiar. A few of us 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 us off the map. You can't go back to high school, 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? And what's God's plan for you?

Last week, in the first chapter of *The Story*, we saw how God created the entire universe just to be with us. His desire is to walk with us, talk with us, live with us, love us. Adam and Eve – and all of us – have a different desire. We worship other gods, we want to play god, we want to be gods instead of letting God be God. We choose our way instead of His. We turn our backs on God and say, “My will, not Thine, be done.” Sin, that rebellion that breaks every relationship, becomes the standard way we treat God and one another. So God lets us have our way, our will, and all the worry and woe that come with it. If you are following along in *The Story* you see the scene in Eden occur again and again – with Cain and Abel, with the people in Noah's day, with the Tower of Babel. The disease of sin infects our race. We cannot save ourselves. We can't get there from here. The cure must come from above. Yet God's plan to get us back, which starts in the Upper Story, will be worked out here in the Lower Story. The Lord decides to build a nation which will bring salvation to the world. And as you will soon learn from *The Story*, God always starts in the most unlikely way with the most impossible situations. His plans also require us to leave behind the familiar and walk off the edge of our maps into the great unknown.

Abraham found himself in such a situation. He had plenty of flocks, possessions and servants. He could have settled down and lived out his years in relative comfort and ease. There were just three problems. Abraham had no land to leave his children. Abraham had no children. And Abraham was hearing things. Somebody kept calling his

name. The voice of a strange God, a God that no one else worshiped, a God no one else chose, chose Abraham. This is what the voice said,

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 promised to give Abraham and Sarah land and children and much more. The birth of a child brings great joy and hope. Lisa and I received an early Christmas present last year. On the day our family gathered to cut down our Christmas tree my son Peter and his wife Jackie took off our grandson Ben’s coat. Underneath he was wearing a T-shirt which read: “I’m being promoted to Big Brother.” The baby is due in August. Abraham and Sarah were looking forward to welcoming a little one. But to receive this blessing, they had to march off the map into the great blank beyond. And when they did, here’s what they found.

First, **God is Always Ahead of You.** When I listen to people who struggle with God’s will, the question I often hear is “Why doesn’t God come down and do something about this?” We have the impression that God is distracted, disinterested and distant. But 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 reached Shechem, Bethel, and the Negev, when they traveled the whole length of the Promised Land, God was always there ahead of them. Even when Abraham made a wrong turn God was 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 began with some brutal facts: this couple was old and infertile. They could buy land but they could not produce children. And without children, there would be no great nation. Years later, Sarah was so frustrated with being barren, she actually arranged for her servant girl, Hagar, to sleep with Abraham in order to produce a child. For some reason, Abraham was okay with this plan. Yet it created endless misery for all of them. I find again and again that 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 everyone around us, only when we surrender and lose ourselves to Jesus do we receive God’s power to deal with life.

Third, **Our Part Is To Be A Blessing.** God sent Abraham and Sarah to be a blessing to all nations. When Abraham and Sarah reach the Promised Land the Bible says, “At that time the Canaanites were in the land” (Genesis 12:6). Abraham and Sarah lived their whole lives among people who spoke a different language, followed different customs and worshiped different gods. They didn’t attack them or criticize them. Nor did

they become like them. They stayed true to the Lord. Twice, Abraham built an altar and called on the Name of the Lord. With every year, it seems that 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.

A year ago we went through a message series that used the acronym B.L.E.S.S. Instead of ignoring your neighbors or judging your neighbors, God calls us to bless our neighbors by:

1. Beginning with Prayer – praying for them.
2. Listening instead of talking
3. Eating with them
4. Serving them
5. Story – sharing God's Story of love with them when the time is right.

Are you continuing to BLESS your neighbors? It is a thrill to see that many new people are going through The Story at home, in worship, in Growth Groups because you invited them. Be a blessing and we will see more Canaanites come to Jesus.

Finally, **We Turn from the Old Life and Trust God.** More than a decade after he left home, Abraham sits alone at night in his tent pitched in a foreign land - not an acre of land to his name, not a single child to carry on his name. He's afraid it was all an illusion. Did he uproot his wife and leave his family and homeland to chase a mirage? That's when the Voice spoke to him.

After this, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your reward will be very great." (Genesis 15:1).

But Abraham, a little feisty in his old age, talks back to God.

O Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus? You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir. (Genesis 15:2-3).

There is some heat behind his words. He feels tricked, fooled and afraid. Whatever is left of his estate will not even go to a relative. He and Sarah are way past the childbearing years. 'God,' Abraham says, 'We just can't get there from here.' Abraham has come to the end of what he can do. He has to trust God to keep His promise. God replies,

This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir.” God took him outside and said, “Look up at the heavens and count the stars – if indeed you can count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” Abram believed the Lord and he credited to him as righteousness (Genesis 15:4-6).

The Lord’s message was clear: ‘If I have the power to create all these, then I can keep my promise to you.’

You and I become disillusioned when things don’t go our way. Our dreams don’t come true. Our expectations are not fulfilled. Our chosen destination is detoured. But God is able to do all He promises. Now notice: I did not say God will do all we desire: that’s another illusion. Faith is surrendering your road map and trusting that God will keep his promises even when you don’t have all the evidence. When we come to the end our maps we must begin to trust God.

Trusting God also requires us to turn away from our old life. You are familiar with one of the most difficult stories in all the Story: the sacrifice of Isaac. Many parents have said to me, “I could never sacrifice my child. If I heard a voice tell me to do this I would assume I need to talk with a psychiatrist.” If you hear a voice tell you to do this then I do recommend you talk with a therapist. Our world today is different from Abraham’s and it’s all because of this story. It is incredible to believe, but in the ancient world, the sacrifice of a first-born son was a common practice. The gods of Abraham’s homeland required it. That’s why Abraham calmly obeys this command. As dreadful as it seems to us, to Abraham it is the way people worship the gods. Not only is Abraham about to kill his only son, he will also destroy the entire mission God gave him: to build a nation to bless the world. Yet, at the last second, with the knife sweeping down toward the child’s heart, God calls Abraham’s name and tells him to stop. This is not only a test of Abraham’s trust. It is a turning point. God wants us to know, without a doubt, that He is not like the false gods. He does not want the sacrifice of children. All these horrid old ways must be left behind. What from your old life is still hanging on? What do you need to leave behind?

From one perspective, you might say God let Abraham down. He never possessed the Promised Land. The only real estate he ever owned in the Holy Land was the grave where he and Sarah are buried. He never became a great nation in his lifetime. Sarah only had one son: Isaac. But because they were willing to follow God and walk off the edge of his map, God fulfilled this promise “all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Genesis 12:3). From Sarah and Abraham came Jesus – the Savior of the whole world, the lamb God provides to be sacrificed in our place.

What map you are about to walk off? No matter what your age or circumstances, God is calling you to join Him in an unknown future He is preparing for you. It took decades for Lois Secrist to answer God’s call. But when she was ready to step off her map, Jesus was still there waiting for her. In 1927, at the age of 15, this pastor’s daughter made a vow to God she’d go overseas as a missionary and help the needy. But Lois never

made that trip of mercy. Life intervened. At 23 she married Galon Prater, a handsome farmhand who became a heavy drinker. Many years later, Galon became a Christian. He was not bashful to tell his drinking buddies about the peace he received from Jesus. Sadly, he was almost 80 and nearing death. He died January 9, 1988.

After a period of mourning, Lois felt her childhood desire for mission work returning. At first she resisted. At age 76, going overseas as a missionary seemed impossible. That ship had sailed. "I said, 'Lord, I'm too old to go now. I can't do this,'" Lois admits. But this great grandmother was determined to fulfill her promise. Having ignored God's call once, she would not refuse again.

So at 82, Lois Prater became the unlikely builder of the King's Garden Children's Home in the Philippines, a lifeline to 35 children whose lives have been rescued from neglect, begging in the streets, and parental abuse. The 35 orphans living in the two-story, 2,000 square foot white stucco home called Lois "Lola," which means "grandmother" in their native Tagalog language. Lois's "children," as she called them, range in age from eight months to 10 years. Each of their stories is heartbreaking. When asked how she did it, she said confidently, "I serve a mighty God. He's in control. I feel I'm not talented enough to do any of this. But God enables me. My responsibility is to do what I can." When you are ready to get up and walk off the edge of your map, God will do the same for you.