



Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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“Giving Up the Familiar: Does Anyone Have a Map”

Genesis 12:1-9

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This morning we continue our sermon series “Giving It Up,” focusing on those things we may need to leave behind in order to make more room for God in our lives.

In my basement, there’s a box of maps. Those maps are a record of my travels across the years. My favorites are the ones I have used hiking—water-proof, tear-proof topographic maps that show terrain and trails. I love maps.

Some of you may remember TripTiks, AAA’s paper spiral-bound maps. In the days before GPS, Google Maps or even the internet, a traveler would go to their local AAA office to plan a road trip. They would tell the office where they were starting and their intended destination. An AAA agent would draw the route with a highlighter on a series of numbered maps. The end result, all spiral bound, was called a TripTik.

I loved TripTiks.

No surprise, I was an early adopter of a GPS. And I’m now partial to Waze, an app that talks you through your journey on your smartphone.

I like to know where I’m going. And how to get there. I’m guessing that I’m not alone in that. Most of us like to know where we are going. And how we will get there.

Which makes it really hard for us to imagine the story of Abraham and Sarah.

God asks this couple—who have so very little—to give up what they have to journey to an as yet unnamed new land. That’s not quite accurate. God doesn’t ask Abraham and Sarah. The invitation is given to Abraham alone.

The late Lewis Smedes was a pastor and professor of theology and ethics. In a televised conversation about the call of Abraham, he said, “I can imagine Sarah waking up about four in the morning, hearing the bustling noises of Abraham packing.

“And Sarah says,

‘What are you doing, Abe?’

‘Packing.’

‘What for?’

‘Well, we’re leaving.’

‘Where are we going?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Why are we going?’

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‘Because He told me to.’

‘Who’s He?’

‘He didn’t tell me.’”

Smedes goes on to say, “And then I could imagine Sarah calling her father: ‘What am I going to do?’ Her father says, ‘I knew you shouldn’t have married that nut.’”¹

You have to be some kind of nut to do what Abraham does. He uproots his family, leaves behind all that is familiar and known, and follows this God he barely knows to a destination that has yet to be revealed to him.

No TripTik. No GPS. No Google maps. No idea where they are going or how they will get there.

The Bible gives us an additional piece of information in Chapter 11, verse 30: “Now [Sarah] was barren; she had no child.” That helps me understand why Abraham says yes to God and why Sarah goes along. They hear God’s promise to give them a child, God’s promise that their descendants will be as numerous as the stars in the sky. It’s the same reason couples go to fertility clinics and undergo in-vitro fertilization and explore adoption. Because they want a child; they desperately, passionately long for a child. Maybe you know how that feels. I’m betting that you know how it feels to deeply long for someone or something—a more meaningful job, a fresh start, better health, a companion with whom to share your life.

For Abraham and Sarah, that longing for something more, something better, something different is all tied up in their decision to follow God.

What if their story isn’t just something that happened to some long ago people in a faraway place but rather a model—a road map—for a life of faith? What if following God involves... well... **following** God? Leaving behind the familiar and heading into the unknown, into mystery, into uncharted territory. On the promise, the hope that things will be somehow better with God than without.

To go where we have never been before, to leave behind familiar markings.... that may involve moving to a new city, taking a road trip, heading off to college. But, letting go of the familiar doesn’t always involve geography. We can leave behind the familiar without leaving our front porch. We can leave behind old hurts and grudges. We can leave behind stereotypes and generalizations. We can leave behind tired ways of relating to people.

I remember this young adult. She came to talk to me about her relationship with her mother. She was married with a responsible job and a house of her own but her mom still treated her like she was a kid. Her mom would visit and kind of take over her house—do the cooking, do all of the cleaning, make “helpful” suggestions about how things could be done differently. The daughter felt disrespected as an adult. She and her husband were expecting their first child. “How can I bring a child into this dynamic?” she asked me.

“You might be surprised.” I said. “You might be surprised how the birth of this baby—this introduction of a new person into the system—can change things with your mother.”

Fast-forward to six months after the birth of her child. I asked, “How are things with your mom?” “Great,” she answered. “My mother is being so helpful—she comes into town and does the cooking and takes responsibility for the cleaning of the house and has so many helpful suggestions in caring for the baby. I can’t wait for her to come back.”

¹ Bill Moyers, *Genesis: A Living Conversation*, p. 162.

I've seen this happen a few times: differences and difficulties smoothed over in mutual adoration of a child. The introduction of a new life makes it possible to let go of old ways of doing things in order to head into new territory. We leave behind the familiar as we discover that the old maps don't work anymore.

Sometimes we have no choice in heading off into new territory. My current favorite author and podcaster is Kate Bowler.² She's the author of the book *Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I've Loved*. Two and a half years ago, Kate Bowler was on the path she had imagined for herself. She had married her high school sweetheart, given birth to a healthy baby boy, achieved her dream job as an assistant professor, and published her first book. Then one Thursday morning the phone rang. Bowler's doctor was on the line with news for which no one ever is ready. Bowler had Stage 4 cancer. It was as if someone had suddenly drawn a sharp red line dividing her life into "before" and "after."

This is how she describes it.

[Before the diagnosis], I kind of pictured my life like it was this life enhancement project, and ...my life is ... a bucket and I'm supposed to put all the things in the bucket. And the whole purpose is to figure out how to have as many good things coexisting at the same time. And then when everything falls apart, you totally have to switch imagination, like maybe instead, life is just vine to vine. And you're like grabbing onto something, and you're just hoping for dear life it doesn't break.³

Vine to vine. Think Tarzan and Jane going through the jungle. Letting go of one vine, grabbing the next, hoping they don't fall. Vine to vine. It's an intriguing image for life with God. No GPS, no map. Vine to vine.

I don't know. I'm still clutching my TripTik. I don't want to let them go. I still want to know where I am going and how to get there.

Life doesn't work that way. Life with God doesn't work that way. God says to Abraham:

Come with me. Follow me... can't tell you exactly where we are going. But, come and follow me.

Those words are being addressed to us today. What do any of us do in response to that invitation?

The hard truth is that a life of following God isn't easy. Abraham and Sarah's life together doesn't get easier when they say yes to God's call...it gets deeper, and more dangerous, more alive and more challenging but not easier. They trade in comfort and predictability for a demanding journey toward hope and new life.

You and I... we've got one life. One life here on this earth. Do we really want to follow this mysterious, elusive, intrusive God who just isn't into roadmaps, who doesn't promise to make everything all right, who is not content with less than all of us?

Yes, we do want to follow such a God. That is why we are here today. Because life with God is better than life without God. Just ask Abraham and Sarah.

Their story reminds us that you are never too old or too young or too tired or too busy or too broken or too anything to hear and respond to God's call to follow.

² <https://katebowler.com/everything-happens/>

³ <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2018/02/08/583774624/what-not-to-say-to-the-terminally-ill-everything-happens-for-a-reason>

Today at this very moment, God is calling us. God the creator of the universe, the Savior of the world, this God of power and glory, wisdom and might is calling us.

Come with me. Follow me... can't tell you exactly where we are going. But, come and follow me.

It's time to leave the maps behind.

Amen.