

Marching Off the Map!

Text: Hebrews 11: 8-12

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March 10, 2013

Quick and over easy is the fare today with only **a story** to tell and **a biblical compass** to plant within our many hearts. God willing, each will place us squarely on the threshold of this morning with our eyes looking far forward.

The story is about an army that got themselves good and lost. This was in the day of Alexander the Great, King of Macedon, later called Macedonia, in a land we now know as Greece. His reign began in 334 BC and ended 11 years later when he was only 32 years-old. Among other points of fame, Alexander was an amazing warrior, undefeated in battle and counted among history's greatest military leaders.

But, that's not the story. No, the story is about an army in pursuit of Alexander.ⁱ They were single-mindedly on his trail, determined to surprise him from behind. What they didn't anticipate was that following Alexander would take them clear off the only map they had. It was a map of the known world at the time, but it was a Greek map that showed only a small portion of Asia Minor. Before long, they were beyond the edges of what was charted, off the map in every way. Predictably, they became anxious, so they accelerated and marched faster and harder, which proved to be of no avail: they were lost in an unknown land with nothing familiar to help them chart their way.

You get the picture the story tells: well-intended, certain-minded, highly-principled, strategically linearⁱ and yet unbelievably lost! Though their story is unique, their experience is not. It happens in life all the time and in myriad ways. And, much closer to this morning: it can happen to communities of people, even communities we have come to love called congregations!

Bring it this close, right here. We are at least acquainted in varying degrees with the many challenges that once-main-line, now-side-line (some have even said increasingly-off-line) churches like ours have come to bear. In lots of ways, the parallel of being in uncharted territory and off the map bears perfect fit.

Some have even identified our era as a new time of reformation, as the church of today finds itself needing to reinvent and reframe, to redefine and redirect - quite honestly because the old maps aren't working so well. The territory in which we had become effective and comfortable has shifted and institutional patterns long relied on are in struggle with spiritual hungers and needs that seek a newer paradigm.

Please, stay with me. This is not a bad thing to be in struggle with, but it is also not easily resolved. To an eternal optimist, it's honestly a time of fresh opportunity as we seek to serve with relevance the *almost* brand new world of today's needs and challenges.

That's why we have Larry Peersⁱⁱ with us this weekend ó to help us to talk about some of these things. And, more important, to let his wisdom help us to form new ways to be and

to become right here, where we have served so well for 300 years. And what a good thing to celebrate: that we can sit down and talk, engage honestly, dream mightily and plan the best for these first days of our fourth century! We were not always so strong that we could bear such conversations. But we are, and we can!

And here is how we can do it! We can take on the spiritual practice of Abraham, our great-great grandfather, which was absolute trust in God. And internalize the spiritual practice of his beloved Sarah, our great-great grandmother, whose extraordinary perspective enabled her to face incredible challenges and surprises in life with the grace of laughter and joy. These are the spiritual practices and values that will bear us whole, even without a GPS.

I met a new friend in North Carolina on my sabbatical a few years ago, a woman by the name of Susan Leonard-Ray. She was a pastor of one of those fastest growing congregations in the south at the time, and since then, she has become a conference executive of the United Methodist variety. But in the midst of a conversation about the viability of the church today, she used twenty words that absolutely inspired me. “You have all you ever need: Your point on the map, your place in time, and the resources of the Gospel.”

I place her wise counsel right next to the joy of Sarah and the trust of Abraham. And though I do not know exactly where such trust and joy will lead us, I believe this in the deepest parts of me: God has not ever left the human family unattended; and the promise of God, eternally benevolent and merciful and life-giving, even yet today, does not ever fail!

Words of a poem called “Our Children, Coming of Age,” by Wendell Berry, give us ground on which to let it rest for now: “In the great circle/dancing in and out of time/you move now toward your partners/answering the music suddenly audible to you/that once carried you before/and will carry you again.”ⁱⁱⁱ

In the Living Spirit of Jesus. Amen.

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ⁱ Halford Luccock. Marching Off The Map. Harper and Brothers, 1952, p.11-12.

ⁱⁱ Larry Peers is a Senior Consultant for the Alban Institute and has been working with First Church during her Tercentennial Anniversary.

ⁱⁱⁱ Thomas Long. Interpretation: Hebrews. John Knox Press, 1997, p. 125.

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