

Called to Follow
Genesis 12:1-9 and Mark 1:16-20
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M. Michelle Fincher
Calvary Presbyterian Church

One of the little-known facts about me is that I usually have an excellent sense of direction. In my family, I was the navigator on road trips—someone else would drive while I was the one with the map, figuring out the best route for us to take. It seems that people generally fall into one of two categories—like me, you have an innate sense of where things are located in relation to one another or you “struggle to find your way out of a phone booth”, as the saying goes. How many of you fall into the “good sense of direction” category? And how many of you are the opposite? I have one friend whose frequently quips, “well, I know where I am when I get there.” Maybe you can relate.

With the advent of GPS, of course, getting places has been completely revolutionized. In some ways that’s a good thing—when I’m driving alone in a place I am unfamiliar with, it was never very safe to try to read a map at the same time I was steering. Driving at night was even harder. But, I lament the loss of using maps. Sure, I can follow the step-by-step directions the GPS or Google Maps app gives me, but I often have less sense of where I am in relation to other points—which truthfully, is not a feeling I enjoy very much. I like understanding the big picture of where my journey is taking me, of knowing how things fit together in the area where I’m traveling.

For centuries the church, in general, saw itself as an organization that had been given the map. The route was all laid out for us, and to be successful all we had to do was faithfully follow the map. In recent decades that meant offer traditional worship geared for a homogenous congregation every. Have a graded Sunday school program for children and an active youth group for teens, plus choirs for every age from 2-102. Field a church softball team or bowling league during the week with supper clubs on the weekends. Make sure adult Bible studies were as intellectual as college courses.

There was not a thing wrong with any of that back in the 1950’s and for a couple of decades thereafter. It worked. That approach nurtured the faith of literally millions of people. The church was in many instances a reliable, safe, comforting bedrock of family and community life. Calvary had its beginnings in

just such a setting. This church was started by men and women who had a heart for God and a heart for this new community that was exploding in post-WWII Alexandria. Through the years thousands of people have passed through our doors, some to stay for a long time and some to stay just a while, with each of them being cared for and nurtured by being part of this fellowship. The legacy we have received from the saints who have come before us is deep and rich.

But, people and life have continued to evolve and change, as they always do from one generation to the next, and one reason so many churches have struggled so mightily over the past 50 years, is that they are still trying to use a map that is not outdated, that will no longer guide the 21st century church where it needs to go.

In both of our scripture passages this morning, individuals are called to follow God without being told specifically where they're going, how they're to get there or what is involved in the journey. No map is supplied to Abram, nor to the first disciples. They are given no details about the "big picture"—that information is known only to God and to Jesus. Abram, Simon and Andrew, and James and John are invited to leave behind what is familiar and comfortable, what has been working, what they are competent in and know how to do, in order to launch out into the unknown, to do things they've never tried, or even imagined. They are invited to do all this based only on faith in what they cannot see or know or understand, to believe that the Someone who calls them is trustworthy to lead them and make good on his promises.

It's a vastly different scenario than what churches have been encouraged to do in recent years. Following a corporate model, churches were told that if they wanted to be successful, they needed to develop short, mid- and long-range plans: strategic planning, it was called. And at some level, that makes total sense. Organizations that have a razor-sharp vision of what their purpose is and how they are going to accomplish that purpose are usually much more effective than those that don't. One of my favorite adages is, "If you don't know where you're going, any road will take you there." If the church doesn't want to wander aimlessly along, it is entirely reasonable that clarity of vision and purpose would be essential.

But, let me ask you: Who imagined that 100 new people would come to be part of Calvary over the past 5 years? When we remodeled the kitchen three years ago with the conviction that something meaningful could be done with that space, who envisioned a new cooking program that would meet the needs of a local, underserved population of children and deepen our ties with Mt. Eagle Elementary

school in the process? Did anyone dare to dream that our mission budget would more than triple in a four-year period? Who saw an instrumental ensemble blossoming with people pulling instruments that haven't been played in decades in some cases, out of attics and the backs of closets, and now they contribute richly and regularly to our experience of God's presence in worship? Or, that we'd ordain three elders for the class of 2020, none of whom have been elders before? If you've been around here for the past 15 years or so, you know how exciting a milestone that is.

Did any of us, in our wildest imaginations, dream two years ago, that Be the Kingdom would have the kind of impact and energy that it's having, that it would open ways for us to work shoulder-to-shoulder with Torre Fuerte, develop a relationship with an organization that provides affordable housing and financial counseling, to partner with Fairfax County parks, that we'd serve the homeless and the hungry? Through our mission efforts, whether from our financial giving, Be the Kingdom, Eagles' Wings, or our Red Wagon Sundays when we give non-perishable food items to the UCM food pantry—we touch children, the sick, the lonely, the hungry, the widow, the single-parent struggling to make ends meet—all the people Jesus said to pay particular attention to, and in return, our service to others is infusing us with new life.

When I started Sermon Talk Back 5 years ago, we began with a handful of folks. Back then, who dared to think that it would grow to what it is now, with every chair in the parlor filled? And *far* more important than the number, the conversation is real and honest as we open our lives to one another, learn from one another and share both our successes and our failures as we live as followers, not just fans, of Jesus. Given what has happened in there over the past several months, I guess I shouldn't have been surprised when the new small group that formed this fall hasn't been small at all. My nickname for the group is the “not-so-small small group,” and what excites me about this group is the hunger for community, connecting, and growing together that it reveals.

I don't know about you, but I never dreamed our 40-year old failing organ would be replaced with a hybrid pipe organ that practically dropped like manna from heaven into our laps, or that we'd fund a new air conditioner, sanctuary renovations, new basement flooring and the kitchen redo—all with cash and all while simultaneously meeting our operating budget which has had to grow to meet the needs of a growing congregation.

I remind us of all these things to say this: God did not hand us a map to tell us where we were going or what was coming or that we'd need to make three left turns before taking a right turn. God has said and continues to say, "you won't have a map, but you have me. I am your GPS. Follow me step-by-step, moment-by-moment, decision-by-decision. Don't look back; look at me, and I'll lead you into the future, the glorious future, I've got planned for you." You know, the days are long gone when the church knows what the road in front of us looks like. Instead, we live in a time when God invites us to build the road *as we walk it*. This is a much harder way to go. It requires faith to be sure. It also requires persistent listening and discernment, which is why being grounded in prayer is so critical for us as a church. It requires flexibility and the willingness to try new things and even to fail at some of those new things, because we learn important lessons by knowing what doesn't work as well as what does.

To follow God in this way also means that we have to live with the tension of not knowing. In the same way that 5 years ago we couldn't imagine the Calvary we share today, I can't begin to know what Calvary will be like 5 years from now. Do you realize that every single person that becomes part of this family changes us? Every single one. Yes, we maintain a core identity and core values that in fundamental ways have been consistent throughout our 69 years, but we are constantly changing and evolving. Every new person brings their particular gifts, their unique ways of knowing and understanding God, their specific spiritual season and language and the ways that help them grow in Christ. Since there are no "accidents" or "coincidences" with God, as the Body of Christ, we don't receive new folks and indoctrinate them into the "Calvary way." We embrace them as brothers and sisters and together, we worship, serve, fellowship and grow in order for God to remake us *all* in the "God way."

I understand how challenging this can be for people who find comfort in familiarity and routine. But, this is our call, just as it was Abram's call and Peter and Andrew's and James' and John's, and we cannot and we will not back away from it. To do that would be first and foremost dishonoring to God, and it would also be dishonoring to all the saints who have sat in exactly the spots you are sitting today. They gave us a legacy of faith and faithfulness, of worship and discipleship, of service to our neighbors and of loving and caring for one another. Imagine what a void there would be in our community and in our own hearts and lives if the charter members of Calvary had said "no" to God's call to start something new because it was risky, or they weren't sure what they were doing. I believe with everything in me that God is continuing to call us to move out in faith,

to follow God into new and uncharted territory, not because we have a road map but because God promises us God's very self to lead us, to go with us, and to make something of us that is fit for God's kingdom. We can't begin to imagine the adventure that lies before us. Come on! Let's follow wherever God takes us!