

## **“Off the Edge of Your Map**

Genesis 12:1-3

*Series: Road Trip Week 1 Abraham and Sarah - God has a New Horizon for Us*

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July 6, 2025

At my graduation from Princeton Theological Seminary, our president, the Rev. Dr. Thomas Gillespie gave us a glimpse of the adventure before 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.”<sup>1</sup> 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 didn’t 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 answering the call of God. We recently saw how 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 pointed at 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, 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 is this: we don’t know what the future holds, but we serve the One who holds the future: Jesus Christ. Now, thirty-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 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 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 uncertain sojourn of divorce.
- Maybe you wake up at night and worry about the dark swirling whirlpool 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 just received a scary diagnosis. The doctors can only tell a little of 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.

Today we start a new message series called "Road Trip: On the Go with God." This is the theme our kids will enjoy this week at Vacation Bible School. Plus, many of you will take road trips this summer. It's easier to stay on the map, to live where the streets and roads are familiar. A few of you 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 are several times when life forces you 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?

In the Bible we see many who leave the familiar behind and walk off the edge of the map into the great unknown. Look at Abraham. He has plenty of flocks, possessions and servants. He can settle down and live out his years in relative 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. Somebody keeps calling his name. The voice of a strange God, a God no one else worships, a God no one else chooses, chooses Abraham. This is what the voice says,

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

What's the big deal? Billions of people have children and go on journeys. Why is the road trip of Abraham and Sarah so amazing? Through this elderly couple God will bless all nations of the world. What is this blessing? The Lord wants to have a loving, saving relationship with people from every nation on earth. He blesses Abraham, Sarah and the children of Israel so He can pour his blessings through them to the world.

This promise is fulfilled when Jesus, a descendant of Abraham and Sarah, dies for our sins and rises from the dead. Now the blessing promised to Abraham and Sarah can be spread to every nation – including us. In His last words Jesus repeats this promise:

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” Matthew 28:19-20

Then Jesus sends the disciples to march off their map and share the blessing. Paul’s method for sharing the blessing is summarized in one verse:

And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others. 2 Timothy 2:2

This verse contains four generations of leaders sharing the blessing: 1) Paul shares it with 2) Timothy who passes it on to 3) reliable people who teach 4) others. Four generations. And with each generation the sharing multiplies and grows. This is how the blessing was passed down for two thousand years to us. We are followers of Jesus today because the church throughout the generations multiplied disciples.

Now it’s our turn. Our vision follows in the footsteps of Jesus and the apostles. We make disciples of Jesus who make disciples of Jesus to the fourth generation. A disciple is a follower of Jesus who loves God, grows in grace and shares with others. We want to multiply disciples and pass on the blessing so that Woodside will be a place where our grandchildren’s children will love God, grow in grace and share with others.

Today, I present to you a glimpse of the road ahead, the edge of the map, the vision I believe God is giving Woodside for the next three to five years. This is the result of prayer, Scripture study, surveys of the congregation, demographic studies of our community, reading books, attending webinars, discussions among elders, deacons, staff, leaders and disciples of all ages over the last year and a half. From all this one clear priority arises. To bless others we need leaders. Developing, mentoring and sending leaders of all ages is the road map to this vision. It’s what Jesus says from the beginning.

Jesus said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.” Matthew 9:35-38

According to Jesus there is plenty of harvest. Many today think no one is interested in the church, the gospel or Jesus. The opposite is true. There is a huge harvest out there. People are hungering, aching, even dying to receive God’s blessing. In fact, today there are three harvest fields – three interlocking communities God wants us to bless. I call them the Macro, the Micro and the Digital. Each is different. All three are interconnected. But you have to use different methods to share the Good News.

The Macro church is the church we know, the church that meets in this building on the corner of Edgewood and Heacock Roads, the church that has a pastor, staff, children and youth ministries, a budget, four worship services, 40 Growth Groups, multiple ministries and mission projects. The Macro church is doing a great job of blessing people and God wants it to keep growing. But as you know, an increasing number of people will not come to the Macro church. If the only place we offer God's blessing is through the Macro church, these people will never receive it.

The second harvest is the Micro Church. Micro churches are small gatherings of believers and seekers – 6-12 people – who meet in homes and public places in the community. Their goal is to build relationships and share God's blessings with people who will not come to the Macro church. Micro churches do not have a building or pastor. They multiply and spread God's blessings throughout the community.

The third harvest is the Digital Church. This is different than livestreaming our services. This church makes disciples online with people all around the world who can't come to Woodside. Through technology we have an open door to spread the Good News about Jesus all around the world – even in places where the Gospel is persecuted. These three harvest fields are interconnected yet different. Here's what we hope will happen in these three harvests over the next 3-5 years. You will see in each harvest fields our greatest need is leaders.

### **In the Macro Church**

The number of Growth Groups will be above 60 because we will train leaders to start new groups on a quarterly basis.

We will engage young adults through 3-6 groups so that the average age of the macro church is 10 years younger than it is today.

Youth and Young adults will be among the leaders of every ministry and mission and will join others in training the next generation of leaders.

The number of children in Sunday School and Adventure Club will double and keep growing.

Children will be seen and heard as leaders in worship, study and service.

### **In the Micro Church**

There will be a network of 3-6 microchurches connected to the macro church but living and multiplying in the community.

### **In the Digital Church**

We will have a team of 3-6 digital missionaries connected to the macro church but who disciple believers online.

Training, developing, raising up leaders of all ages is essential. God is calling us to make disciples of Jesus who make disciples of Jesus. It is vitally important for us to hand the baton of leadership to the next generation.

And this is why I've chosen today to share this with you. When we surveyed you about the future of Woodside last year some said: "Hate to think about it, but there will have to be a succession plan for Doug" and "We need to be ready for the transition to a new Pastor (i.e. anticipate Doug's retirement)." I guess you've noticed what I see in the mirror every morning. Despite my best efforts to stop it, I'm getting older. I now automatically get the senior discount at McCaffrey's. More and more I am asked, "Are you thinking about retirement?" Well Lisa and I are thinking and praying about it and seeking God's guidance. Some pastors plan to "die in the pulpit with their boots on!" That's not me. That would not be fair to my wife and family nor would it be good for you. You deserve a lead pastor who is vital and visionary, not someone who is hanging on because his ego won't let go.

On the other hand, I am deeply concerned that we hand over the leadership baton in a way that accelerates the growth of Woodside. Of all the work I've done over the last thirty-one years, this is the most important of all – to make this transition a launching pad for incredible blessing and growth after I'm gone.

So we not going to do this the traditional Presbyterian way – big surprise! The traditional Presbyterian pastoral transition requires the pastor to leave before the church begins to search. The search then takes three years or more. Imagine a relay race where a runner drops the baton in the dirt where it sits for three years before the next runner picks it up. That's a guaranteed loss. Instead, I am working with the elders and the Presbytery leaders to develop a seamless pastoral succession. The search will happen while I am still serving. This will allow for an overlap between the two pastors so that trust can be built and leadership can be handed over to the new pastor before I retire. I had a choice: either I say nothing, announce my retirement years from now and then leave you to wander and search for 3 or more years or we start early, work together, and build a strong succession that keeps the momentum and growth going.

And when do I plan to retire? Two and half years from now – at the end of 2027. So please don't be worried or anxious. I'm still going to be here for a good while. We will lay the groundwork for the search this summer. In the fall we will form a pastoral search team. The search for candidates will occur during 2026. Lord willing, the new pastor will be approved and welcomed sometime during 2027 and I will complete my ministry at Woodside near the end of 2027. We plan to partner with a national pastoral search firm.

Now I realize all this may come as a surprise, even a shock, to you. For some of you, I am the only senior pastor you've known at Woodside. For others who are new, you just finally feel settled here and now you're worried everything will change. Well change is always challenging. Yet the outcome depends on how we view change and embrace it. If there is one thing I know about you, my Woodside family you are always eager to try new things for the glory of God! What can you do now? Please pray. We are asking for an extraordinary amount of prayer from you as we move toward this new horizon. We also ask

you to strengthen and deepen your commitment to Woodside. Now is the time we need everyone to be all in!

As you have in the past, will you trust me now as we face the future? Will you lock arms with me? Will you walk with me as we answer God's call to walk off the edge of our map into the future He has waiting for us?