

*Your GPS for Life: Pilgrims On the Way*  
Genesis 12:1-9; August 10, 2014  
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It's good to be back! I've been on sabbatical for about three months, studying discipleship movements and missional communities. I've been to Sheffield, England; to Portland, OR; and right here in San Jose at City Team. It's been a very fruitful and challenging time; it has also provided rest and refreshment. So – thank you! – for giving me this chance to get away and also to learn some things that will (hopefully) help us, as a congregation, to move forward in our discipleship path.

One of the things I want to tell you up front is that *discipleship* and *mission* are words that are on everyone's lips – all over the Christian world, in American churches nationally and right here in San Jose. It feels like each place has its own independent sources for discipleship and mission; and yet they are all using similar language and strategies. I can only conclude that this is truly a movement of the Holy Spirit – and it's pretty exciting to be part of that movement!

This sabbatical journey has been a *pilgrimage* for me, and that's what I want to talk to you about today. A pilgrimage is more than a journey; it has a clear destination and spiritual purpose. Obviously, a pilgrimage means travel – and in our day that means airplanes, trains and automobiles – as well as your own two legs. It can also mean delays, last-minute changes, frustration and extra expenses. Some days just don't go so well – your back hurts and you've got bronchitis and you're jet-lagged – but you still have to run up and down multiple stairways to catch the next train. (Yes, that describes my first 8 hours in England. My overseas flight was delayed and it caused me to miss my connecting flight.) But when you finally *do* reach your destination and have managed all those bumps in the road, you feel pretty good about yourself. And – precisely *because* of those bumps along the way – you've had some great experiences. What happens along the way is sometimes just as important as reaching the destination.

You and I are on a pilgrimage – that's one of the biblical descriptions of discipleship. We are a people on the Way – a people following Jesus, a people with a destination and a purpose. So, how do you find your way? How do you know how to reach your destination? Well, you can use a map, or perhaps a GPS – a global positioning system. Now, when Jim and I take a road trip, he's the driver and I'm the navigator – a sure-fire system for killing any marriage. So I've learned to use the GPS (hey, I've even learned to use a map; I'm good!). I enter my start and stop; and I pay attention to the stopping points. I've learned to deal with the little panicky voice that tells me, “Off route! Off route! Recalculating route!” A GPS can be very helpful as you plan your way and as you follow your plan. You will find that as pilgrims, you are given a GPS – perhaps we can call it a *God-Positioning System* – that gives you a starting point, a destination and the stopping points along the way.

For the next three Sundays, starting today, we will be looking at Your GPS for Life. I will be sharing with you some of the insights I have learned about discipleship over the past three months in terms of *pilgrimage*, *family*, and *lifestyle*. Today we begin with *pilgrimage*, as we watch Abraham begin his journey with the call to leave and to go. Next week we'll take a look at the household of God, how we are to be a *family* of disciples. And finally, we'll see what it means to change up your whole life to take on a *missional lifestyle*.

Let's take a look at our text. Abraham started out on the pilgrimage of a lifetime when God called him to leave everything behind and go to a new land. Look at Genesis 12:1: “Leave your country, your people and your father's household.” That's a pretty tall order! I wonder what you or I would say? “Wait a minute, God. Hold on, there. You mean – sell my house? Give up my job? Get a passport and leave my country? You mean – leave all my friends and my parents and all the people I love?” That's the deal. That's what God was asking Abraham to do.

And that's what Abraham did. God said, "*Leave*." Put all those things behind you, because they aren't what's most important in your life. All of it – house, property, nationality, family and friends – all of these are gifts from God to begin with. The most important thing is to follow God's desire for your life. That's where the life is! That's where your joy will be found. Now, you may not be asked to leave behind any of these things, but the question remains: Could you do it? If God asked you, would you do it? Is God allowed to ask you to leave?

So the first command God gave to Abraham is *leave*. Then he says, "*Go*. Go to the land I will show you." Now, as you heard earlier, God didn't give him a map. Abraham wasn't given the details, as far as we know. (In fact, I wonder what he told Sarah. "Where are we going? Which direction shall we go? How long will it take?" "Ummm... I don't know.") Abraham wasn't given a map; God didn't give him a destination. Nevertheless, Abraham packed up his belongings and went. He traveled on faith – literally.

*Going* is part and parcel (as the Brits would say) of leaving. Leaving and going are two sides of the same coin. (Right?) If you leave one place you *have* to go somewhere else. In the same way, mission is an integral part of discipleship. You can't do one without the other. Jesus said, "Go into all the world and make disciples." We go out to tell about Jesus, to serve others, showing the love of God to the world. *Going* is a big part of discipleship. That's mission.

Leave the old behind; go out to embrace the new! And *remember the promises*. We've heard the GPS commands *Leave* and *Go*, and now there's that third one, *Promise*. And there are many. Jesus says, "I am with you always, even to the end of time." He says, "I will send my Spirit to lead you, to give you the words to say." He promises to walk with you every step of the way, to bless you and make you a blessing to others, and finally, to bring you safely home.

You know, Abraham was never given a map, but he was given a promise. God promised him several things:

- not just a new family, but a new nation;
- not just a new home and land, but a new name and reputation;
- not just a life, but to be blessed and to *be* a blessing to others.

As we read earlier from Stephen's testimony in Acts, it was the *promise* that kept Abraham going – promises that weren't completely fulfilled in his own lifetime. Think if it. Abraham never owned land in Israel, except a burial place for Sarah. He never built a house; he lived in tents. Sarah was only able to give him one son. And let's face it: Abraham wasn't much of a blessing to anyone; in fact, he seemed to stir up trouble wherever he went. And yet, Abraham was greatly blessed, believing in God, hearing God's voice, obeying him. He left and he went – and found himself on the adventure of a lifetime, and adventure now immortalized in Scripture. And it took his entire lifetime. Eugene Peterson calls pilgrimage "a long obedience in the same direction." It's not easy, but it's worth the trip! All God's promises to Abraham were eventually fulfilled – in spades! The greatest promise of all was that through Abraham, through his descendent Jesus, indeed *all* the peoples of the world are blessed. God keeps his promises; you can believe in God – and trusting in his promises, you can leave and just... go.

A life on pilgrimage isn't always easy; it doesn't always follow the charted path. So, is it worth it? Is discipleship, following Jesus, worth the leaving and the going? The disciples themselves answered that question, one day when the crowds that had followed Jesus began to thin out. Discipleship had just gotten to be too hard for the great majority. Noticing this, Jesus turned to ask the Twelve, "Will you, too, go away?" I wonder if they hesitated; if they stopped to weigh the pros and cons. But then they said – quite honestly and frankly: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."

Right? What other life would you lead? Who else could you follow to give you meaning and direction? What other GPS is there, that is as reliable and true? My friends, there isn't any other. Jesus said, "I AM the way, the truth and the life. You can't get to the Father except through me." A life without Jesus is like a boat without sail or rudder; you would simply drift through life without destination or purpose, without the wind of the Spirit blowing you into a safe harbor. *Yes*, the pilgrimage is worth it! It's a life totally worth living – such that all other lifestyles become pale, limp and life-less by comparison.

*Leave, go, promise.* That's your GPS when you go on pilgrimage. It's your start: leave your old life behind. It's your finish: find a new life, the one God will show you. And it's the stopping points: God's promises that sustain you on the way. It's the command given to each one of us, not only personally, but also to us as a congregation.

At St Timothy's, we have been following some models that have worked well for us in the past, but which, by themselves, may be falling short of what God is calling us to. One of those models is the membership model. This is how it works: we attract people, offer them some great programs and then invite them to become members. (Sounds reasonable.) But let's face it: our membership far exceeds our weekly attendance – true for any church using this model. The simple act getting people to join as members doesn't necessarily help them become disciples. But you know what? We were never told to build the church; that's Jesus' work. Jesus' command to you and me is to *make disciples* – disciples who will learn at Jesus' feet; disciples who will go out to make other disciples, teaching them to follow him, making a difference in our world. That's the command Jesus has given us.

Go and make disciples. Now, does that mean we'll get rid of our membership roster? No. Membership, after all, is a beginning form of commitment. But to be faithful to Jesus' call, we need to move beyond just membership-building to discipleship-making. It's time to return to that original model that Jesus gave his followers – to us – to make disciples.

On my own sabbatical-pilgrimage, I saw congregations who had to leave behind old models when they got serious about discipleship. One, through no fault of their own, lost their property and had to scatter into home churches for a year. That turned out to be a very fruitful time for them, and – ironically – they grew. St Thomas church in Sheffield now includes 7 campuses, about 60 missional communities, and have made thousands of new disciples. Another church – a small, dying urban congregation in Portland – made the sacrificial choice to give their property away, so that a younger, more vibrant Christian community could grow. It was hard! Their pilgrimage took them through some unexpected twists and turns – but both congregations are now making disciples and making a difference in their communities.

*Go, leave, promises.* That's your GPS system on pilgrimage. Don't be afraid to leave the old behind and to go in a new direction – if that's what God is calling you to do. Remember his promises – they are real. God keeps his promises and fulfills them in unexpected ways. A pilgrimage is a long obedience in the same direction. It's one you take with your whole household; in the company of your congregation – but more on that next week. Amen.