

Galatians 3:23-29
Going Off the Map
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6-23-19

Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. ²⁴ So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, ²⁶ for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. ²⁷ For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave^(sl) nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

What do we do when we reach the end of the world? I don't mean the eschatological end of the world end of the world. But what do we do when we reach the point where our directions or the script we thought was guiding our lives ends and we don't know what to do or where to go next?

More than 300 years before Christ Alexander the Great led the greatest army that had ever been assembled, taking country after country as they went. But when they reached the Himalayas, the scout team came back to Alexander, full of concern, and said "we have marched off the map, we don't know where we are. We should go back to where we go."

They had literally reached the end of the world as they knew it. And Alexander was reported to have said: "Mediocre armies always stay within their territories, truly great armies always march off the map."

One of the consistent themes of Scripture, which has proven to be so true of my life as well—and perhaps yours too—is that God frequently calls people to walk off the map. God calls them to venture into places unknown to them, places they never imagined they would go.

Take Abraham and Sarai for example, two who were called by God to leave their family and their land and go to a land that God would reveal to them. God didn't give them much by the way of detail, he just said "go." God told them that they would be parents, God would make them a great nation, and the world would be blessed by them, but years passed and years passed and nothing, so they started to wonder if God was still there.

God called Moses to lead twelve tribes of Israel out of Egypt, to what was supposed to be the Promised Land. Moses didn't know how to do that, and they had been in slavery over 400 years. So, he marched them straight into the wilderness, where they stayed for 40 years where they wavered between despondency and a longing just to go right back to captivity in Egypt.

It was in the desert that God gave them the law, the Ten Commandments, a map of sorts on how to live as his people when they didn't know precisely where they were or where they were going. The law, the Apostle Paul writes in this morning's text, was their guardian. But the law cannot bring us to our full freedom and identity. It was never meant to do that, in fact Paul says in our text that the law actually imprisons us.

The Greek word her uses for guardian was the word *Pedagagos* it's the word we use to get the English word pedagogy. In Greek the word pedagagos was used to describe a servant who was assigned to a child to accompany them to and from school, he or she was their keeper or protector until they came to an age in which they could live and make decisions for themselves.

Does the name R. Lee Emery ring a bell? He was Gunnery Sargent Hartman from Stanley Kubrick's very disturbing war film *Full Metal Jacket*. Or if military references aren't your thing, another approximation might be PL Travers Mary Poppins—book version, not the sugary film versions played by Julie Andrews and Emily Blunt.

For God's people, the law functioned like this drill instructor, it told them how to eat and when, when to move and when, what to eat, and wear, and when and how to worship. The law was their keeper. But if you have ever spent much time in Leviticus or Deuteronomy, you will know that the Law is overwhelming to say the least. It is dizzying in its specificity, and discouraging in its demands. But what Paul is saying here is that the law was never an end to itself, only our keeper and caretaker until something better would come. Faith.

The Faith that Abraham displayed was amazing. God called Abram to leave his home and family and community and go to an unknown place where god would be revealed to him. And God made promises that at the time seemed too outrageous even to believe. But faith is not always easy, and it always takes us beyond our understanding.

Faith, though, as Paul writes in Galatians, is not intended to be an abstract subjective notion. Rather he shifts faith from the abstract to the personal. Faith in a person, Jesus Christ; and the lived faith of a person, Jesus. In verse 25 he says “now that faith has come (now that Jesus has come), we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons and daughters of God, through faith.”

This is tremendous news, Jesus makes bold claims to us—just as he did when he called Peter, James, John, and the other disciples. The Word of God comes to us and says I'm going to be with you and you with me, I'm going to use you, and show you your true purpose and life. I'm going to make you fishers of people, shepherds of God's sheep, and then send you out to baptize and teach all that I have taught you.

The law and our guardian keeps us firmly fixed on the map with very clear boundaries. Faith in Jesus Christ is exciting and nerve-wracking precisely it leads us to the places in our lives where we feel like we're at the edge of the map, the periphery and outer-lying edges of what is known or comfortable, which as we know is where Jesus spent most of his time. That could be choosing to make a job or career move, even though you are unsure of how exactly it's going to work out. It could mean volunteering with children or senior citizens. It could mean placing your faith above your political or social allegiances and truly allowing Christ to rule over all areas of your decision making. There at the periphery of our understanding or comfort is where Jesus is. Sometimes he invites us off, and sometimes he shoves us off the map.

Stu's story.

Faith is a tricky thing, especially because we still tend to think of it in purely transactional terms--the cosmic if/then agreement. What I mean by this is: we still often think of faith like the law, if I believe these certain things about God and Jesus, then then that will cue God to hold up God's end of the bargain for me, and I will receive the results or rewards that I want. If I place my faith in Jesus, then he will take care of me for the most part (I still have to do my part), life will go smoothly—hopefully—and when I die I'll get to heaven. Of course this is not false, Jesus wants to live in and through us and to bless us with his gifts, and one of the gifts of peace with God is the knowledge that the Cross of Christ purchases your salvation and mine, and the gift of that salvation is knowledge that our eternity will be where Christ is, with God.

But this, I would say, is a view of faith that is still very much on the map. And I would say, is not where Jesus resides. Jesus is not just the priest who blesses our plans for our lives and sanctifies our efforts. Jesus is the savior who is always moving off the map to the place where our lives end and where faith becomes sight.

So what happens when we don't just walk off the map, but are literally and without warning catapulted off to the place for which there is no point of reference? Might be in the form of a diagnosis that catches you completely off guard, or for our high school and college students maybe it's a first year Philosophy or Science class that tells you that believing in God is a foolish and irrational thing. Your journey off the map might come like it did for me, when you lose someone in your life so abruptly and traumatically that most days you struggle to make sense of the world. What happens when you are completely dislodged from the things in life that help you make sense of the world around you?

Well this is when the Apostle Paul would remind us, as he does in verse 27 that when you are baptized into Christ, you have actually put on Christ. That it was not your decision to let Jesus into your life, but that you were brought, invited into his cleansing bath. When you stand in this it is not your life, not your righteousness, not even necessarily your faith that is seen, but your life is now hidden with Christ. That when the Father sees you he sees the righteousness and faith of Jesus.

There is so much that challenges our faith, that maybe it's not our faith that we need to be confident in, maybe it's not trusting in our trust that we need to do. This is when we put our faith not in our ability to believe, but in the faith of Jesus Christ, and the practices given by Christ to the Church.

When life takes a turn that you didn't see coming, and you are propelled into a new and foreign place and faith is put to the test. Maybe even when faith is a struggle, and you don't have a lot of confidence in what it is that you believe. This is where what we have is not *a* faith, or even *our* faith, but *the* faith. When it becomes so much bigger than each individual believer, but when we are grafted in and buoyed by the cosmic body of Christ. When the practices of the Church, the reading of the Word and the prayers, the gathering at the Eucharist banquet table, and the act and remembrance of our baptism where we have, as Paul says, "put on Christ."

The good news is that when you put on Christ, in his baptism, not only do you receive his righteousness, you also are joined to brothers and sisters everywhere who are taking the same step in faith you are. But be careful, because it will always lead you to the place where your strength falters, but Jesus never does.