

# “Marching Off the Map”

The Rev. S. Shane Nanney – May 15, 2022

Acts 11:1-18 and John 13:31-35

Remember the free maps you used to be able to get at gas stations? Well, they're not free anymore, except at a tourist welcome center.

Used to be that when you'd get the family together for a long road trip; one of the parents would load up the glove box of the family car with those fold-out paper maps -- you know, the kind that featured an oil company logo on the front and never folded back to its original configuration!

Dad would go down to the local gas station, and while the attendant filled up the car, checked the oil, put free air in the tires and washed the windows, he would go inside and grab some free maps for the trip. If you were AAA members, though, Dad would most certainly have already ordered the *TripTik*, which gave him turn-by-turn directions and stamped-on warnings about construction zones.

These days, though, you can hardly find a paper map at the gas station, and, even if you do, you'll have to pay for it after you pump your own gas, check your own oil, and find quarters to activate the air hose. Then again, you probably don't need the map anyway because you have a GPS on the dashboard, or you downloaded the directions off Google Maps. Even if you're off-road, a hand-held GPS can tell you about your current location within a couple of feet. With all that gadgetry available to you, even if you're in the middle of nowhere, you can determine that you are at least somewhere.

Paper maps seem to be going the way of the cassette tape and the black-and-white TV. How many of you have actual paper maps in your cars right now? Chances are that nobody under the age of 50 has one.

Will paper maps someday be something we only see in museums? Well, not so fast, says Joel Minster, chief cartographer for Rand McNally says: "I don't think paper maps are going anywhere, but people may be using them differently, more as a companion to the online or digital map." In fact, the paper map may be the only truly reliable full-time form of navigation. Despite the ease and convenience of technology, batteries go dead, a spilled coffee can fry a GPS unit, or you may be in a place where the signal is weak, not to mention the fact that

the GPS is sometimes just dead wrong. Some pastors report that people using GPS to find their churches always wind up on the back side of the property, acres away from the church, where there is no road to get there from the GPS destination.

The other reason why maps aren't going anywhere is that they provide one thing that GPS and online directions -- despite their colors, detail, and satellite imagery -- they cannot give context. While a GPS can tell you where you are and what's immediately in front of you, it can't show you all the alternate routes, the possible shortcuts, the way to get around that traffic jam. It won't lay out the whole trip for you in one panoramic view (unless you relish trying to read fine print while driving at 70 mph). Debra Turner, vice president of marketing for Compass Maps says that paper maps offer big-picture geometry. They can show you four or five counties, and not just the neighborhood you're driving in. Where a GPS chirps "Recalculating!" when you veer off the route, a paper map will quietly show you all the possible ways to get there that you may never have considered.

The book of Acts reads like a travelogue for first-century Christianity. Indeed, it's helpful to have a paper map nearby when you're reading it just to track where all the apostles are going. This week's text isn't strictly a geographical travel narrative, though Peter does travel back up to Jerusalem from Caesarea on the Mediterranean coast at the beginning of the passage. Really, it's more of a spiritual *TripTik* outlining the direction God was taking the early church. When Peter goes to Joppa and eats with the Gentile Roman centurion Cornelius, the other "apostles and believers" think he has marched completely off the spiritual map, their criticism sounding like that voice on a GPS calling for Peter to "recalculate" his ministry back to the circumcised Jews and away from the pagan Gentiles (*Acts 11:1-3*).

But where the other apostles and believers only saw the narrow route laid out by their old downloaded GPS (Genesis to Prophets Scriptures) -- a route that they perceived to be only about the way and law of God's chosen people, the Jews -- Peter explains to them that God had showed him the context of a much larger map that revealed the new road God was building toward inclusion of the Gentiles in the church. The context that God shows Peter, came in the form of a threefold dream, where a large sheet was lowered from heaven full of animals, he and his fellow Jews considered to be unclean. God's command to Peter was, essentially, to march off the long-held maps Peter and his people had walked for

thousands of years by eating only kosher foods permitted by the law of Moses. "GET UP, PETER; KILL AND EAT," says God, inviting Peter to eat food that was only suitable for Gentiles (v. 7). God was carving out a new route that would bring Jews and Gentiles together: "WHAT GOD HAS MADE CLEAN, YOU MUST NOT CALL PROFANE" (v. 9).

God, in fact, doesn't just give Peter the map but also the direction of the Spirit. Because Peter marches off the old route, he begins to see how God's plan for the whole world is unfolding like a huge gas station map. Cornelius had also received a vision from God, which altered his map as a Roman centurion. The Holy Spirit sent Peter, a Jew; and Cornelius, a Gentile, off their prescribed routes to meet each other as an example of the new route God was showing the church. No longer would Jews and Gentiles run separate paths, but now they would serve the same Lord as part of the same church. As Peter put it, "I REMEMBERED THE WORD OF THE LORD, HOW HE HAD SAID, 'JOHN BAPTIZED WITH WATER, BUT YOU WILL BE BAPTIZED WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT.' IF THEN GOD GAVE THEM THE SAME GIFT THAT HE GAVE US WHEN WE BELIEVED IN THE LORD JESUS CHRIST, WHO WAS I THAT I COULD HINDER GOD?" (v. 16-17)

A GPS can be a great tool, but it can also lead to a kind of tunnel vision that causes drivers to focus so much on the route on the screen and the directions given by the voice that they fail to see the big picture of the road in front of them. In 2011, for example, three women were in a rental SUV on their way to a Costco convention in Washington state when they followed their GPS instructions to the letter . . . down a boat ramp and straight into a lake. Neither of the other two passengers in the car stopped the driver. They just did what they were told.

A lot of Christians may view God's instructions the same way, focusing only on what we perceive to be our one and only path and not on the big picture context of God's mission in the world. Many Christians have doggedly stuck to their own narrow theological interpretation of Scripture without listening to the Spirit's guidance for the larger context. Many confuse nationalism with the Word of God and in such, they place hardships on others instead of sharing the love of God. They refuse to eat anything other than the kosher and call all other profane. If left up to many today, the church would be white, middle to upper-class, and looking more like a country club than a church, serving only themselves. As a result, they wind up off track and in deep water. There is no other way to say it, they are just wrong, and they are no longer following God's

will. God is love and if we are not acting in love, we are not following God. We all may suffer in the short run, but history will judge them for it.

We are here to heal, not to harm. We are here to love, not hate. We are here to create, not destroy. Preaching that, we are to love our neighbor, welcome the stranger, and stand up for the marginalized does not mean we are making political statements. It means we are making Biblical statements. We are taking back the faith from the pharisees.

God invited Peter to unfold a much larger map that reveals a world of possibilities for people of all kinds, united around the singular direction of God's grace and God's redemptive mission in the world. What is the current path that you're on that keeps you from seeing God's big picture? Who are the people whom others consider to be off the map and outside God's grace? Are they immigrants, homeless, the hungry, the minorities, the gay or transgender individual, the woman who seeks to have an abortion after the fetus died within her, someone of a different religion or no religion at all, or maybe the woman with multiple children from multiple fathers who is looking to break out of the cycle but constantly running into roadblocks that force her to stay where she is? How will you, like Peter, listen to the Spirit's direction and march off the map to reach those whom the rest of the world whizzes by?