



As I returned home yesterday afternoon from co-directing a week of junior high church camp, you'll have to excuse me if I suddenly shout out *hey gang, listen up please! What did I just say? Listen up please!* And I probably don't need to wear a mic today, as my loud camp voice is still in effect!

Today we continue a four-message series titled *Music of the Heart*. This week's message is titled *The Long and Winding Road* and is based on the song of the same name by the Beatles. As much as I love *The Long and Winding Road*, I really wanted to use *Let It Be*, which is my favorite pop/rock song. It would go well with the story of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, and his statement *not my will, but yours be done* (Luke 22:42), but since I used that passage during Lent, I didn't want to repeat myself.

One of the reasons that music is so powerful is because songs are markers in time. When we hear some songs they take us back to a time that was very important to us. When I listen to *The Long and Winding Road* I am transported back in time to a period of my life that was very influential to me.

Our Scripture text comes from the book of Genesis, the story of God's call of Abraham, a passage I have returned to often in my messages and in my own personal Bible study. The theme of *The Long and Winding Road* fits very well into the story of Abraham's call, as it movingly portrays, to me, the idea of a spiritual journey. There is a great sense of longing and searching in *The Long and Winding Road*, and that search, that longing, is very evident in the story of Abraham.

Genesis 12:1-9 –

*1 Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.*

*2 And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.*

*3 I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."*

*4 So Abram went, as the Lord had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.*

*5 And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people that they had acquired in Haran, and they set out to go to the land of Canaan. When they came to the land of Canaan,*

*6 Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land.*

7 Then the Lord appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built there an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him.

8 From there he moved to the hill country on the east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. And there he built an altar to the Lord and called upon the name of the Lord.

9 And Abram journeyed on, still going toward the Negeb.

*Whatever Your Plan is For Life, Know That God Has A Plan for Your Life, and That Plan May Be Very Different From Yours.*

I think that, deep down, we tend to believe it was easier for Abraham to follow God than it is for us. I think, for some reason, it seems to us that it was easier for Abraham to pick up everything and follow God's call, but it must have been every bit as complicated then as now; perhaps even more complicated.

And what I would like to know is this – how much time elapsed between God's call of Abraham and Abraham's response. There is no indication in the book of Genesis about how long it took Abraham to respond to God, but it seems immediate. Could we respond so quickly? I don't know, because it requires a lot of rearranging of our lives.

God has a plan for your life. I don't know how detailed that plan is and I certainly don't know the generalities of the plan but I know that God has a plan for your life. I am not at all a Calvinist (John Calvin was a brilliant theologian of the Middle Ages and a leading figure in the Protestant Reformation who gave us the language of *predestination*, the idea that some people are *predestined* to salvation and some are *predestined* to damnation, a concept that I do not buy into so I don't believe that God plans all the minute specifics of our lives down to the nth degree. You will never, for instance, hear me say, *I guess it was meant to be*), but I certainly believe that God has a plan for your life, and for mine. And that's all well and good, but here's where it gets interesting – that plan may be far different from your own plan for your life. I often have the privilege of hearing people's stories, and they are fascinating. One of the reasons why they are fascinating is because of the abrupt turns and detours they take; turns and detours that are unexpected, surprising, and very often, deeply meaningful and satisfactory.

One of the reasons why the story of Abraham is so fascinating is because of his embrace of God's call upon his life, in spite of whatever plan he had formulated for his life. I believe the call of Abraham serves as a template for all of humanity. It does so, first of all, because the *calling* of God is upon each of our lives. We often reserve the idea of *calling* for pastors or others serving in vocational ministry, but God places a call upon every person. God called Abraham but did not call him into vocational ministry. In fact, the people in the Bible who were called by God were mostly *not* vocational ministers. I like to remind people that while I have been called into ministry, every person has been called to ministry as well. Abraham was a typical person of his day, going about his daily routine when God stepped into his life and called him for a particular purpose. We have no idea why God chose Abraham, and the calling of God can be quite mysterious. Why does God choose particular people for particular roles? I don't know; he just does. Abraham serves as a template, secondly, because he answered God's call without knowing all the details to God's purpose and without having a complete plan laid out in detail before him. Most of us, when we travel, create a detailed itinerary. We plan the trip, make our reservations, and put together a schedule for each day. Abraham, apparently, answered God's call even though he had not received many answers from God about the details of the journey. God doesn't even tell Abraham where he is leading him, only that he is to travel *to the land that I will show you*. I'm not always the most organized person, but I certainly like to know where I am going before I strike out on a journey!

I arrived home yesterday afternoon from a week of junior high church camp. When I go to camp I am always very impressed by the young people who come there to serve as counselors. I think we had 24 counselors last week, most of whom were in their 20s. And even at that relatively young age it's fascinating to hear their stories of the abrupt and unexpected turns in their lives, turns that I believe were

orchestrated by God. And those turns extend to the students who attend camp as well. One of the counselors told me that at one of the camps earlier this summer that 15 students expressed a sense of call to ministry. I imagine those students already had a plan for their lives, but their lives are now beginning a different path. Their lives will continue to have some abrupt twists and turns but all the while God will be with them and leading them.

When flying, I find it fascinating to look down from thousands of feet in the air to see such a different perspective. From the air, we see that nothing is a straight line. Rivers and roads meander like snakes, but they arrive at particular destinations. Our lives are the same, but we don't have the "from the air" perspective that allows us to see the beginning, the journey, and the end, so we must trust in the fact that God has a plan for our lives.

Over the course of my now 36-plus years of ministry I have tried to orchestrate a few of my own twists and turns, most of them very unsuccessful. At one point, back in 1990/1991, I decided it was time for me to go a different direction in life, and I decided I would leave vocational ministry. I went on several job interviews and had a few offers to go in a different direction in life, but when it came right down to it, I just couldn't change from ministry. But even within the now 36+ years of vocational ministry, as I look back, I can see how God has orchestrated a plan that has – at times – been very different from my own. It has been full of very interesting twists and turns, and some of those twists and turns were, at the time, very difficult and very difficult for me to accept. And even though a few of them are still difficult for me to accept, I can look back and see the way in which God's hand worked and I now have a much clearer view of his plan, a plan for which I am very grateful.

#### *Trust God's Plan for Your Life, Even When You Can't See It.*

If you could go back in time and change three things about your life, what would they be? Why would you change them? And, do you think your life would be improved by the changes? I have often wondered what Abraham thought as he looked back on his life. I imagine that, to him, it was full of unexpected twists and turns, but I also suspect that he learned that those unexpected twists and turns became some of the most important parts of his journey.

How often have you said, as you looked back on your life, *I wonder what would have happened if...?* How winding has the road of your life been? And in what ways have those unexpected and unplanned twists and turns been a blessing to you?

Moses did not plan to lead the Hebrew people out of captivity in Egypt. In fact, Moses did not know, for a long time, that he was a Hebrew. And when he saw an Egyptian beating one of the Hebrew slaves Moses killed the Egyptian, fled into the desert, and did not plan on returning to Egypt (Exodus 2:11-21 – **11** *One day, when Moses had grown up, he went out to his people and looked on their burdens, and he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his people. 12 He looked this way and that, and seeing no one, he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. 13 When he went out the next day, behold, two Hebrews were struggling together. And he said to the man in the wrong, "Why do you strike your companion?" 14 He answered, "Who made you a prince and a judge over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?" Then Moses was afraid, and thought, "Surely the thing is known." 15 When Pharaoh heard of it, he sought to kill Moses. But Moses fled from Pharaoh and stayed in the land of Midian. And he sat down by a well. 16 Now the priest of Midian had seven daughters, and they came and drew water and filled the troughs to water their father's flock. 17 The shepherds came and drove them away, but Moses stood up and saved them, and watered their flock. 18 When they came home to their father Reuel, he said, "How is it that you have come home so soon today?" 19 They said, "An Egyptian delivered us out of the hand of the shepherds and even drew water for us and watered the flock." 20 He said to his daughters, "Then where is he? Why have you left the man? Call him, that he may eat bread." 21 And Moses was content to dwell with the man, and he gave Moses his daughter Zipporah).*

Moses settled into the life of a farmer, and one day while tending the sheep of his father-in-law came upon the burning bush, which is the moment when God called Moses to go back to Egypt and lead the people out of captivity (Exodus 3:1-10 – *1 Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian, and he led his flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. 2 And the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. He looked, and behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. 3 And Moses said, "I will turn aside to see this great sight, why the bush is not burned." 4 When the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." 5 Then he said, "Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." 6 And he said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. 7 Then the Lord said, "I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings, 8 and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. 9 And now, behold, the cry of the people of Israel has come to me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them. 10 Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt."*).

Moses had settled into a comfortable life when God had interrupted him in the burning bush. That interruption was certainly not part of Moses' plan, but it was God's plan.

David was tending sheep when Samuel came to find the next king. David had no plan to become the king of Israel. I imagine he had some plan for his future, which would not have included becoming king, but God's plan found him. (1 Samuel 16:1-13 – *1 The Lord said to Samuel, "How long will you mourn for Saul, since I have rejected him as king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil and be on your way; I am sending you to Jesse of Bethlehem. I have chosen one of his sons to be king." 2 But Samuel said, "How can I go? If Saul hears about it, he will kill me." The Lord said, "Take a heifer with you and say, 'I have come to sacrifice to the Lord.' 3 Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what to do. You are to anoint for me the one I indicate." 4 Samuel did what the Lord said. When he arrived at Bethlehem, the elders of the town trembled when they met him. They asked, "Do you come in peace?" 5 Samuel replied, "Yes, in peace; I have come to sacrifice to the Lord. Consecrate yourselves and come to the sacrifice with me." Then he consecrated Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice. 6 When they arrived, Samuel saw Eliab and thought, "Surely the Lord's anointed stands here before the Lord." 7 But the Lord said to Samuel, "Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart." 8 Then Jesse called Abinadab and had him pass in front of Samuel. But Samuel said, "The Lord has not chosen this one either." 9 Jesse then had Shammah pass by, but Samuel said, "Nor has the Lord chosen this one." 10 Jesse had seven of his sons pass before Samuel, but Samuel said to him, "The Lord has not chosen these." 11 So he asked Jesse, "Are these all the sons you have?" "There is still the youngest," Jesse answered. "He is tending the sheep." Samuel said, "Send for him; we will not sit down until he arrives." 12 So he sent for him and had him brought in. He was glowing with health and had a fine appearance and handsome features. Then the Lord said, "Rise and anoint him; this is the one." 13 So Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the presence of his brothers, and from that day on the Spirit of the Lord came powerfully upon David).*

Elijah was fleeing from Jezebel when God appeared to him in a still, small voice. Elijah's plan was to save his life by fleeing, but God sent him back. That was definitely not Elijah's plan, but it was God's plan. (1 Kings 19:9-18 – *9 And the word of the Lord came to him: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" 10 He replied, "I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the*

only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.” **11** The Lord said, “Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.” Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. **12** After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. **13** When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. Then a voice said to him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” **14** He replied, “I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.” **15** The Lord said to him, “Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram. **16** Also, anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet. **17** Jehu will put to death any who escape the sword of Hazael, and Elisha will put to death any who escape the sword of Jehu. **18** Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and whose mouths have not kissed him.”).

And it wasn't only individuals, but a nation as well. Not long after the time of Solomon, Israel had divided into two separate kingdoms – Israel in the north and Judah in the south – and by 597 BC many of the people in the southern kingdom of Judah were carried away into captivity in Babylon. Psalm 137 famously captures the despair of the people as they were lived in captivity. (Psalm 137:1-9 – **1** *By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. 2* *There on the poplars we hung our harps, 3* *for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!” 4* *How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land? 5* *If I forget you, Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill. 6* *May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not consider Jerusalem my highest joy. 7* *Remember, Lord, what the Edomites did on the day Jerusalem fell. “Tear it down,” they cried, “tear it down to its foundations!” 8* *Daughter Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is the one who repays you according to what you have done to us. 9* *Happy is the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks.*

It was a heartbreaking time for the people, and was certainly not a part of their plan, but it was during that time of captivity when the synagogue came into prominence, which provided places of worship that exist to the present day. It was during that time when many of the Scriptures were written and a time when religious life took greater prominence for many people. It wasn't part of their plan, but it was part of God's plan.

### *What Does God Want You to Learn From the Long and Winding Road of Your Life?*

I wish I could see and understand more while in a particular moment in life, but I mostly only see in retrospect, which means that my decisions in a particular moment are not always the best, at least in terms of God's plan. Too often, I try to take control of a plan, instead of seeking to discern God's plan.

It was, in many ways, an interesting week at church camp. As it always seems to do that week, it rained. A lot. We all have questions we want to ask God some day, and I have a question that has now moved into my top three, and it is this – *why does it always rain so much the first week of July, at camp Wakon da ho? It's always nice weather the week before and the week after, so why our week?* On Thursday, we were actually quite excited because the sun came out after lunch and we were able to enjoy being outside. Towards the latter part of the afternoon, when almost everyone was on the rec field, the clouds rolled in and it began to sprinkle. It wasn't enough to give up and go inside so we kept on with our activities. Suddenly, I heard a noise, but couldn't figure out what it was. If you have never been to the camp, it is 150 – 200 acres of mostly woods, with the camp in a valley surrounded by hills. Because of the hills, it is impossible to see what is coming at you, in terms of the weather. I turned and

looked at one of the hills and quickly learned what was making the noise. It was a huge downpour moving quickly our way. I could see the line of rain coming across the trees and it was making a loud noise as it hit the leaves with tremendous force. The rain came on us so quickly, and so forcefully, that we had no time to get to the dining hall and take cover. It was a torrential downpour, with so much runoff that the benches in the campfire area – between the rec field and the dining hall – were submerged under water. By the time we got to the dining hall we were all completely soaked and muddy from splashing our way up the hill. And then the lightning started, which meant we had to keep everyone inside the dining hall. For hours (the rules stipulate that whenever there is lightening we must keep the kids in the dining hall). While soaking wet and muddy. It was a miserable time. The kids were anxious to clean up and get into dry clothes, but the lightening would not allow us to go back to the cabins. It was, it seemed at the time, the lowest point of the week, but in retrospect, it was when things really came together and we bonded much more strongly and became a more united community. And, I'm sure, it was one of the most-shared memories of the week by the kids to their families and friends. Difficulty is always a part of the learning experience, and in some mysterious way, I think it is safe to say that without that difficult day, we would not have had a week that turned out to be so meaningful.

So don't discount difficulty, and don't discount the twists and turns in life. It would be wonderful if life always moved in a nice, straight line, but it doesn't. Life is always comprised of many surprising twists and turns, but it is in *The Long and Winding Road* that God makes his plan known. And he does have a plan, even when we can't see it!