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Blessed are you, O God, for you have made us your children. You have brought us here to worship you and given us the confidence of your salvation. Teach us your truth, and send your Holy Spirit upon us this day. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Where do we go when we are in uncharted territories? When we think that we are on the right path, only to hit rough patches, a road that goes nowhere, waters that rock and roll, or the destroying winds of misfortune?

The famed Methodist preacher Halford Luccock once published a book of sermons called *Marching Off the Map* (Harper & Brothers, 1952). The title comes from a sermon of his in which he referenced a story from the life of Alexander the Great.

After Alexander's unprecedented string of victories that opened the way for his army to travel from Asia Minor through Persia and into Afghanistan, his generals came to him one day and informed him: "We don't know what to do next. We have marched off the map."

This, says Luccock, is the critical moment of decision, and it doesn't happen only to world conquerors. Frequently, in life, bold and adventuresome people come across situations in which there is no precedent to guide them.

And when you add in today's technologies, things can become even more unpredictable. Before the advent of GPS, we would pick up city or state maps before venturing out to destinations unknown. Being in the military and traveling around the country, I would visit AAA and pick up a trip tic which would show possible construction along the way and the easiest paths through or around the major cities. 99% of the time, GPS has eliminated the need for these paper maps or not, as some folks have found out the hard way.

A group of California tourists became lost in Utah at the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. They attempted to use their GPS to plot their route to the Grand Canyon, but the GPS route they took included a series of rough roads that ended in cliffs. The group eventually was led back to safety with the help of sheriff deputies. A few summers ago, a mother and son on a camping trip had GPS in their car and got stuck on an abandoned mining road for five days.

The mom barely survived. Tragically, her son did not.

In 2011, three women visiting Bellevue, Wash., were out after midnight, unable to find their way back to their hotel. After asking the GPS to re-route, they took what they thought was a road that would lead them to the highway. Instead, their SUV ended up sinking into deep water. The "road" turned out to be a boat launch, and the water a lake. All three managed to get out safely, but by the time the tow truck arrived, the SUV was completely submerged. "We've seen sitcom parodies of something like this and to actually see it is surprising," said a local fireman.

Early one foggy Saturday morning, a father was driving his wife and two kids through South Brunswick, N.J. At a T intersection, where the only options were to go left or right, this driver opted instead to follow his GPS and go straight. He missed the initial stop sign, ran over the lip of the curb, and continued for another 100 feet before hitting a house. Unfortunately, two passengers who were not wearing seat belts were hurt and taken to the hospital. "This stuff really happens," a police spokesman remarked.

In times when we find ourselves in uncharted waters or not sure where we are headed, we are faced with two choices: turn around and return to the security of what we already know? Or forge ahead, marching off the map?

This is where the apostles and Peter finds themselves in today's reading from Acts.

"The apostles and the believers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. 2 So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him 3 and said, "You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them."

The apostles were not just saying to Peter, "What were you thinking?" They were being much harsher, reminding Peter that he violated Jewish Law by associating and eating with Gentiles.

I wondered just how Jewish Peter was. We know that Paul was extremely zealous in following Jewish Law. But what about the simple fisherman Peter? We find that out today. After seeing the folded sheet filled with beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds in a dream, and hearing the voice of God saying, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat." He replied, "Surely not, Lord! Nothing impure or unclean has ever entered my mouth". Peter did follow the Law. At least up until now. He was entering uncharted waters.

At this point in the early church, most of the followers of The Way, were Jews and followed those laws in so far as they were also followers of Jesus. What God was asking of Peter was totally foreign to him. But neither he or the other apostles could argue with the results of the Holy Spirit. They were being shown a new direction in which to travel. They were just beginning to understand Jesus knocking down the old law in order to replace it with a new love. And that love would now be their compass.

Just like the apostles, many Christians today doggedly stick to their own theological interpretation of Scripture without listening to the Spirit's guidance for the larger context. As a result, they wind up off track and in deep water. We can become like the Pharisees whom Jesus called "blind guides" (Matthew 23:24) -- another way of saying that we sometimes miss the forest for the trees!

God revealed to Peter a much larger picture and greater possibilities. Sure, it meant marching right off the map and that has its inherent difficulties and dangers as the early Christians found out.

Many Christians today believe that, we as Episcopalians, have marched right off the map and into the quicksand. Heck, **many Episcopalians** feel that way. Then there are other Christians willing to accept a broader range of theological perspectives and cultural differences, and argue that "What God has called clean, do not call unclean." It is no wonder that disagreements are bound to arise in the church over hot-button issues such as abortion, premarital sex, medical ethics, the ordination of women, same-sex unions, and gun laws.

Such tensions are tricky because they don't all break down clearly into right and wrong, or good vs. evil. As Episcopalians, we realize that this diversity is really a balancing act.

But at the same time, we're charged with being guardians of the ancient faith while being open to fresh expressions of that faith. It's difficult at best to know what we should do. And now we are in the process of electing a new Shepherd for the Diocese of Michigan. More uncertainties as we travel the road ahead.

Who are the people whom others consider to be off the map and outside God's grace? 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?

We can do no better or no worse than to follow the example that Jesus set in his own earthly ministry — an example of being willing to break established purity laws in order to minister to the outcasts of society. Remember, that Jesus healed on the Sabbath, put the needs of children before the needs of adults, and preferred the company of sinners. His mission was to institute a new and better way. “A purity of law turns into a purity of love,” observes Susan Andrews, the pastor of Bradley Hills Presbyterian Church in Bethesda, Maryland. She says that what we are left with is a purity of love “embodied in the gracious and hospitable ministry of Jesus Christ.”

Perhaps the security of our GPS Map is a tendency to reach out to only a few members of God's enormous and wonderfully diverse family. We are challenged to reach out to the neighborhood teen who is becoming increasingly withdrawn. To the homeless person standing with their sign. We are invited to welcome young singles to church, and to make an effort to take the church to elderly members who are relegated to their homes because of illness or disability. To reach out to other Episcopalians who have felt left out or abandoned. Unless we look beyond our normal categories of friends and acquaintances, we'll end up like the Jewish Christians who could not see beyond their own customs and religious traditions.

It is not an easy path for sure. But I believe that if we always step out in faith and lead with love, we will never be lost.

AMEN