



“*Missio Dei* – Mission of God”

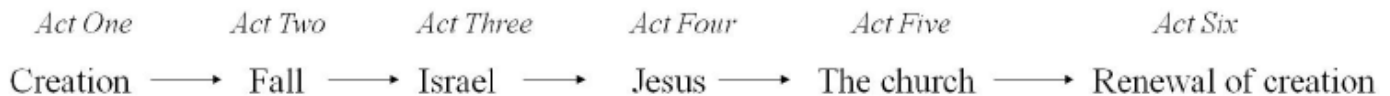
Genesis 12:1-3; Psalm 86:8-10; Matthew 28:16-20

God’s mission and ours

Do you remember the Blues Brothers? They sought to make enough money to save the Catholic orphanage in which they grew up. As they put it, they were on a “mission from God.”

It was funny in the context of the movie, but all disciples of Jesus are on a mission from God. However, our focus this week begins not with the mission God has given us, but with the *missio Dei*, the mission of God, God’s aims and purposes. The *missio Dei* is the driving focus of God on the rescue of a rebellious and broken humanity and the renewal of all creation. This is the story to which all Scripture points; it is the work of God that is revealed to us in God’s holy Word.

A great way to grasp the fullness of God’s work in this world, too see the accomplishing of the *missio Dei*, even in a broken world, amidst a sinful people, is to learn the story as a six-act play:



Act 1 is the story of creation. God creates everything there is and pronounces it all good. God also creates humans in God’s own image and gives them responsibility for all the creatures of the earth. God gives the humans, a man and a woman, a beautiful garden in which to live and work. God even comes to walk with them in the evening. There are two trees of special note in this garden. The first is the Tree of Life, from which the humans will eat and, hence, live forever. The other is the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. God has warned the humans that they are not to eat of that tree or they will die.

When Act 2 opens, all is good and wonderful. The humans enjoy the relationship with God that God intended for them. But soon, it all falls apart. The woman is tempted to eat the forbidden fruit, believing that she will then know what God knows. She will be like a god herself. Sadly, she eats the fruit. The man follows suit and their relationship with God is torn apart. Rebellion against God has become their way. They hide from God and blame each other for what has happened. Tragically, they must leave the Garden and will never eat from the Tree of Life. They head off into exile and soon, murder and other horrors also become their way.

What’s to be done? God “uncreates” with a flood and preserves a single family who will start over. But it goes no better. Eventually, the humans build a tower to the heavens, so that they can go where the gods go, just as the humans in the garden wanted to know what the gods know.

Thus, when the curtain falls on the second act, a deep and foreboding silence has fallen across the stage. What is to be done? More to the point, what will God do? The humans are still estranged from God and one another. All of God’s creation still groans under the weight of rebellion and pride. What is the cure for the curse? Where is the repair for the rupture? How will God put things right so that love and mercy and justice are again the way of life?

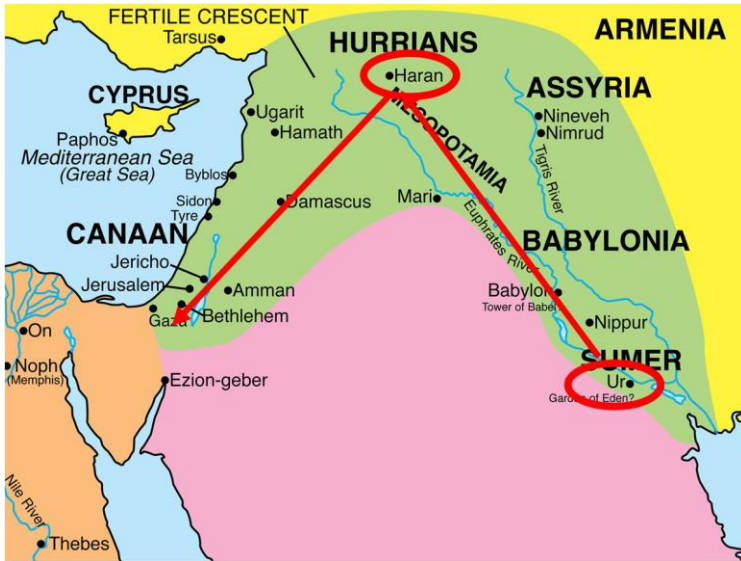
We might think God would simply abandon this project, leaving humanity to its own devices. But that is not the nature of God nor of God’s mission, the *missio Dei*. Instead, God is going to come to a husband and wife, for God’s mission will not be thwarted.

Act 3 – A Fresh Start

In Acts 1 and 2 (Gen.1-11), we encountered a Tree of Life and a boat big enough to carry two of each species

on the planet. We met a talking serpent and the Nephilim. We saw a cherubim standing guard over a garden and rain falling at the rate of fifteen feet per hour.

But all that changes when we come to Genesis 11:27, when we are thrust into the story of a family that can, at times, be uncomfortably like our own. When Act 3 opens we find ourselves in the world of the ancient near-east, a world and a time that can be reached by historians and archaeologists. It is nearly 4,000 years ago. Granted, a long time when measured by the time of our lives, but we know about civilizations much older. The Great Pyramid of Egypt has stood for more than 700 years by this time. It is the time of Hammurabi of Babylonia and his extensive written legal code.



In this ancient, but knowable, world we meet a man named Abram.¹ He and his family live in Haran, far to the north of Canaan,² his father having moved there from Ur. One day, God speaks to Abram. There is no fanfare, no burning bush, no angels or flaming swords. Just a guy and the Creator of the Cosmos. There is nothing distinctive about Abram. God could have chosen anyone through whom he would begin the restoration of all creation, but he chose Abram. Abram, later called Abraham, would become the father, the patriarch, of God's people.

Three promises

God makes three promises to Abram when he comes to him that day:

1. God will give them a land.
2. God will make Abram's family a great nation.
3. All the families of the earth will be blessed through Abram.

There does seem to be one problem with God's plan. Abram and his wife, Sarai, are old...really old. Sarai is far past childbearing years. But God promises them a family and it is a family they will get.

It is the third promise that gets forgotten and overlooked; yet I couldn't really overstate its importance. God's call of Abraham sets the stage for all that follows. Yes, Abraham will become the father of a great nation. Yes, he will go to the land given him by God. But, more importantly, "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" through Abraham. In the Old Testament, blessing is a gift from God, encompassing material well-being, peace, and success in life. Blessing shapes the lives of Abraham's family and the "outsiders" they meet. Such blessings will be brought to all the people of the earth. Indeed, God's rescue project will come to its fruition in a descendant of Abram named Jesus, from the Galilean village of Nazareth.

As Act 3 rolls on, the Israelites will often forget that Abraham was not chosen by God merely for his own sake, nor even merely for theirs, but for the sake of the whole world. Later, when God rescues the Hebrews from

¹ Later in the book of Genesis, Abram will be given a new name by God. "Abraham" means something like "father of a multitude." The name of Abram's wife, Sarai, will be changed to Sarah. God changes Abram's name when God tells Abram that circumcision of male children is to be a sign of the covenant between God and Abram. In ancient cultures, a new name would signify a new phase in the person's life.

² Canaan is the ancient name of the land that would become the homeland of biblical Israel, given to them by God. Later, it would come to be called Palestine. The people living in this area in the time of Abraham were known as the Canaanites.

Egypt, it is for the sake of all humanity and every corner of creation.³ It was always easy for the Israelites to forget that they were to be the city on the hill to which all nations would stream (Isaiah 2:2-5; Matthew 5:14-16). It was tempting to them, as it is tempting to us, to turn inward, to build barriers, to see people as “outsiders.” Jesus would remind his fellow Jews that they were to be the “light to the world.” But if we are going to understand the larger biblical story, we must keep God’s larger purpose in mind: putting right what was ruined by the rebellion in the Garden of Eden – yes, the *missio Dei*.

After his resurrection, Jesus would instruct his disciples and, hence, us all, on our part in God’s mission. This is usually called the “Great Commission.”

“The Great Commission”

Summons is a bit of a harsh word. It seems rather demanding. The Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary says, “*summon* implies the exercise of authority.” I guess that is the rub. But it is also the point. Jesus does summon us, his disciples, with all the authority of a Lord and Master. Take a close look at the well-known passage from Matthew 28.

It is a summons, not a request. Jesus is not asking nicely; he is not asking at all. Further, this is not a summons of a few or only of the ordained or only of those who work for a church...it is a summons of all those who claim to be followers of Jesus. Plainly put, we cannot claim to be disciples of the Christ and ignore the summons.

To what are we summoned? The heart of this summons can be found right here, in what we call the Great Commission from Matthew 28. Jesus summons us to be his helpers. We, his disciples, are to go out into the world and make more disciples, baptizing and teaching. Sometimes “mission statements” can get long and abstract. Ours is neither. We are to make disciples. In the New Testament, “disciple” translates the Greek word, *mathete*, which connotes a master and pupil relationship. A disciple, a *mathete*, is an apprentice or student, more than merely a follower or fan. The *mathete* seeks to learn from and emulate the Master. In the Great Commission, the Master summons his disciples to help in the Master’s work, to participate in the *missio Dei*.

It isn’t hard to understand why we might think that Jesus is speaking to someone other than to us. He says we are to make disciples by baptizing and teaching (v. 19 & 20). Most people never baptized anyone and, likely, neither have you. But it would be a profound mistake here to think that Jesus is speaking only to Marta or me or any other clergy.

Baptism signifies our entrance into the body of Christ. Clergy may be the ones who lay on hands, but all of us are summoned by Jesus to do all we can to build up the community of God’s people. It is we who invite. It is we who welcome. It is we who promote harmony and unity in the body. We are not spectators at the baptisms on Sunday mornings, we are participants. This is the whole point of the baptismal response: “Now it is our joy to welcome...” When Jesus tells his disciples to baptize “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” it is a summons meant for us all.

Teaching

Jesus’ summons to teach may seem more straightforward than his summons to baptize, but even here we can get off track. We can fail to grasp that we teach others in **everything** we say and do. The teaching Jesus speaks of is far more than the teaching that goes on in a classroom, as important as that is. If others are going to learn the faithful obedience of a disciple, it is going to be through us, through Jesus’ helpers . . . through you and me, just as we learn from each other.

Imagine a person who enters First UMC with no prior understanding of Jesus or of our faith, or worse,

³ The book of Ruth is an excellent example. It tells the story of a young Moabite woman, i.e., not an Israelite and not a descendent of Abraham, through her Israelite mother-in-law, is blessed by God and incorporated into God’s people. She goes on to be the great grandmother of King David, the greatest of all Israel’s kings.

someone who thinks they understand, but do not. If they are to begin learning what it truly means to be a disciple, they are going to learn it through us...and we will learn through them. Yes, thankfully, the Holy Spirit leads and guides us all in this. But still, God wants to work with us, not despite us nor without us. We are so used to needing Jesus that we can fail to see Jesus' own "Help Wanted" sign.

Reaching Out

To reiterate, a command both simple and direct: Jesus tells his disciples to go to "all nations," – yes, everyone, everywhere – making disciples of Jesus, baptizing them, and teaching them the path to obedience. The Christian church has always understood this commission to be our own; and it is not limited to the New Testament. Israel understood that they were the people of God, chosen by God to be his agents, to be the light to the world, to be the ones through whom the whole world would be blessed. (See Genesis 12:1-3, Isaiah 2:2-4, and Isaiah 42:6 for example).

We know we are to be the light to the world, but we are often unsure as to how to go about it. Sometimes we think it means we must pull people out of their homes or stand on street corners passing out tracts. Sure, we ought to invite our neighbors to church with us and share the Good News with strangers, but the biblical understanding of reaching out, of being the light to the world, extends to every part of our lives. We reach when we worship, when we learn, when we love, when we care, when we serve, when we work, when we play – every part of our life is to reach out and a witness to others.

Let me give you one example. We often don't think of our own worship as an act of evangelism or reaching out. But, when a person who is not a churchgoer visits our worship service, they are looking for three things. They want to feel the presence of God. They want to see the Christian church living out its faith – kindness, love, patience, service to others, and so on. Finally, they want to see the relevance of the faith for their lives.⁴ Every Sunday, each of us, as a member of the First UMC community, is an important witness to the reality of Christ's love and invitation to all persons. Just as sports heroes are unavoidably role models for our youth, we are always, at all times, and in all places, witnesses to the living reality and glory of Christ's sacrificial love. It is our part in the *missio Dei*.

We'll close with this from Rev. Lauren Gerlach:

God creates humanity out of love and gives us a call to follow God. Not only does he call us to follow him, but he invites us to participate & engage in some of the work he does! We learn something poignant about the nature of God by his invitation for us to be co-creators (populate the earth) and missionaries on his behalf, despite our sin. This means God can and will use imperfect people! We matter to God. To spread the good news to the corners of the earth, as Jesus commands his disciples after he is resurrected, we must first come to know the good news message. Secondly, we must transform our worldview to see ourselves as "on mission" in spreading this message. God could have easily kept his own mission for himself... but that is not the case. The heart of God, as revealed in Scripture and in Jesus, desires to include and call us into mission.

⁴ This is from the survey and focus group research of George Barna.