

BELPRES CHURCH

The Plan

Genesis 12:1-3; Matthew 28:18-21; Rev 7:9-12

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Well, good morning.

Good morning.

All right. You're much more alert than the other service. I just got to tell you right now. Well, it's great to worship with you, with those of you who are online. My name is Rich Leatherberry. I'm the Pastor of Mission here at BelPres. And rather than reading scripture up front, I'm going to do something a little different and just pepper it throughout my message this morning.

Now, my oldest daughter came home from Christian middle school one afternoon with a homework assignment to interview my wife and me. And she wanted us to describe how we view the Bible, like what is the Bible? Well, as a pastor, I tried to keep my answers short. And a few days later I asked her what some of the other parents had said. Now, some said it's God's word so we shouldn't question it. It's a rule book for Christian living. And some just said the Bible was disconnected and didn't make a lot of sense for them.

Here's how I read it. The Bible is a story about God's passionate pursuit of His broken world that is running away from Him and His plan for rescue. And do you know what we call that plan for rescue? Mission. This is the last sermon in a series that we've been going through, looking at the main narrative arcs that go throughout the Bible and how they make us make better decisions, live better lives, dream better dreams. And the narrative arc we're going to be looking at today is this narrative arc of mission that goes from Genesis to Revelation.

Mission is the narrative that brings all the other narratives that we've been looking at together, redemption, kingdom of God, exile and homecoming. God pursues us, but not just us. God pursues the ethnic peoples of the world, the nations. God redeems us all from sin and brokenness, welcomes us all into relationship with Him. And that helps us recover our original design to build God's kingdom based on the foundation of mercy, justice, and love. But all that, it starts with mission, God's plan for rescue.

So first, God sends a man, Abraham, and then a nation Israel and then a savior Jesus. And finally his church to help people who were spiritually far away from God find their way back to relationship with Him. And just to be clear, the church God sends is not just a particular church like BelPres or the church in the west. The church God sends is the global church. Mission is from everywhere to everywhere so that at the name of Jesus, every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. Amen.

Amen.

Mission is not my idea. It's not Scott Dudley's idea. It's not the session of our church's idea. Mission is not a Western idea. It's not a racist idea. Mission is God's idea. It's His mission. God is the one doing all the sending. Our God is a missionary God and God can't stop himself because He's so unconditionally, unrelentingly, sacrificially in love with us all. No one listening to this message this morning would know Jesus and experience His love if those first disciples hadn't gone out on mission. The message of redemption and kingdom and homecoming is not from here. Someone brought it here because Jesus sent them.

So I want to look at the mission narrative from Genesis to Revelation and then see, wrap it up a little bit and see what it means for us. Now throughout this series, we've seen through the first several chapters of Genesis that a God created this perfect world that has gone bad. The masterpiece of God's creation, that's you and me, that's us. We rebel, choose separation and brokenness, and reject God. Well, that messes everything up. It wrecks our relationship with God. It wrecks our relationships with each other. It wrecks our relationship with creation. And it just goes from bad to worse in the Book of Genesis.

So God scatters the whole world, sends the whole thing into exile. It's like God's like, "Enough." Genesis 12 is the announcement of the beginning of God's plan for rescue. The Lord had said to Abraham, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household, and go to the land that I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you. I will make your name great and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and whoever curses you, I will curse. And all people on earth will be blessed through you." See, God chooses one man, Abraham, and God will bless him. And then God will make Abraham into this great nation who will love and follow God. And God's plan is to use this one nation eventually called Israel to be a witness to those scattered nations about God's love and God's faithfulness.

Well, as the Bible moves along, Israel eventually moves to Egypt where they end up as slaves for 400 years. So God sends a man, Moses, to deliver them from slavery. And through this series of plagues and one really bad day in the Red Sea for Pharaoh and his army, God delivers Israel. Moses leads Israel out into the desert and to Mount Sinai where God will give Israel the law and the commandments. And God intends for the law and the commandments to shape Israel, to form Israel into this kingdom community that our God wants to shape. But before Moses does that, God instructs Moses to give these words to Israel. Moses says, "You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully, then out of all nations, you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

Now, what's significant here is God assigns three specific roles to Israel in what Moses says. First, they're to be God's treasured possession. Israel will be the one nation that God blesses, that God prospers, that God protects. Second, they will be a kingdom of priests. Now, as the role of priest was to represent God and to mediate God's blessings to the chosen people, Israel, God is here now saying they're going to be a kingdom of priests. They will represent God and mediate God's blessing to the surrounding nations. And then third, they're to be a holy nation, which means they're to be different. They're set apart from the nations. They are to reflect and be displays of God's character and nature to the nations. God gave Israel this unique identity in the desert. They're to be God's chosen and blessed people and they were always, always, always to be a witness to the scattered nations. That was God's plan, reflecting God's character, mediating His blessings to the surrounding nations.

But Israel quit following God and they failed two of their three assignments. They really liked being God's treasured possession. That was really cool. But when it came to mediating the blessings and to reflecting God's character to the nations, they failed miserably. So God sent prophets to warn them, multiple prophets. And in each case, Israel refused to repent and do what the prophets said. So eventually, God allowed Israel's enemies to conquer them and send them into exile. The prophet Isaiah writes this in lament as a woman with child and about to give birth. "So were we in your presence, oh Lord. We were with child, we writhe in pain, but we gave birth to wind. We have not brought salvation to the earth. We have not given birth to the people of the world."

Well, Israel's in exile and God's plan seems to be a bit of a bust, right? 600 years go by and all this brings us to Jesus who was God in the flesh. Isaiah calls him the Prince of Peace. Jesus will heal the primary cause of the world's brokenness and make us whole. John the Baptist announces Jesus in this way. He says, "Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." Jesus is God's solution to our sin problem. By his bloodshed on the cross, he fulfills the requirement of justice. We're saved by grace through faith. "For God so loved the world," John tells us, "That he gave His only Son. That whoever will believe in Him will not perish but have everlasting life." And then in his last week on Earth, Jesus emphasizes the scope of his mission by going into the temple, turning over the tables, driving out the money changes and the people selling animals there.

You see, it was Passover and the Jews from all the neighboring cities were coming to Jerusalem. They had to exchange their money in order to purchase animals for the Passover sacrifice. The temple officials set the market up in the court of Gentiles, the only place in the temple where non-Jews could come and worship. Jesus drove everyone out. And as he does, he quotes Isaiah and saying, "My house will be called a house of prayer for the nations." But the people back then, they were looking for a local deliverer, not a global savior. They wanted someone to deliver them from Roman oppression, and Jesus clearly wasn't going to do that. So the Jewish religious leaders found a way to arrest him, and the Romans hung him on a cross until he died.

Three days later, Jesus rose from the dead conquering sin and death, and he immediately appeared to his disciples whom he had prepared for this very moment. He brings them up on a mountain and he gives them the great commission. "All authority in heaven on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing

them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I command you. And surely I will be with you to the very end of the age."

Now at this point, I hope that you can see that the great commission isn't like some idea Jesus came up with at the very end of his ministry, like Jesus is about to ascend into heaven and suddenly he remembers one more thing. "Oh, oh, I almost forgot. Go therefore make disciples of all nations. Good luck with that. See you. Bye." No. No, he doesn't do that. Jesus is emphasizing and echoing the heart of our Heavenly Father for the nations since Genesis 12 and the heart that Jesus has been displaying throughout his ministry. Go make disciples as Jesus has done within every ethnic people group. But more importantly, Jesus is handing the mission baton to the church.

The last book of the Bible is written by the Apostle John and it records a revelation of future things that Jesus has shown him. And so John writes after this, "I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count from every nation, tribe, people, and language standing before the throne and in front of the lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands and they cried out in a loud voice, 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the lamb.'" Isn't that an amazing picture? It's a beautiful picture. God wins people from every nation, tribe, and language gathered there in front of the throne. And what John sees in those days as a result of the faithfulness of the church in these days to obey Jesus' great commission. Genesis to Revelation, that's the mission arc of the Bible.

So what does it mean for us anyway? Let me try and tie a couple of things together. Two things. First, being part of God's mission narrative, it gives us greater purpose. I recently spoke with a woman who was married, but her husband did some pretty bad things and he refused to get help. He didn't change. He wouldn't change. So for her health and safety and for the health and safety of her daughter, she had to leave. She moved to another place and she divorced him. Well, she met some Christians there who prayed with her, who listened to her, shared the gospel and helped her renew her own faith. And they connected her with other people who could help her find healing.

Well then, she felt God nudging her to go to other women who'd experienced similar things as she'd experienced. So she started a ministry right there where she was to these women. She'd listened to their stories, prayed with them, shared the gospel with them, and she connected them with other people, would help them. They found love and they found community and they found relationship with Jesus Christ. God changed the lives and the narratives of so many women through her ministry. Well then she felt God nudging her to go to another country, to women who needed to experience the power of Jesus' redeeming love in that other country. So now she is preparing to go.

Now, here's the surprise ending. She's not from here. She's part of a people group in Africa, moved to the US, started the ministry in Texas, came here to Seattle, and now she's preparing to go to another African country. You see, mission is from everywhere to everywhere. And now it's one of the narrative threads of her life. God is bringing His runaway world home through her ministry, and she has so much more joy and so much more purpose. And she's living a better story.

What would it look like if God's mission narrative was part of your narrative thread, part of your life story? How might you use your time differently? How would it shape or maybe reshape your life or your family? See, God's mission, it gives us greater purpose. It helps us pray differently, worship differently, raise our kids differently. It gives us new adventures. And God can use even the things in our past that He's healed in order to help others find their way home to relationship with God. That's the power of God's mission narrative.

The second thing that all this means, I think, is being part of God's mission narrative makes God so much bigger, and that gives us courage in other areas of our lives. Now, you've probably heard me talk a little bit about this, but a few years ago I went on one of many mission trips that I've been to the Athens in order to meet refugees who'd come there and the ministries who were serving them. And I heard many stories of abuse and persecution. See, these people were coming from places in the world where there is no church, where they have no access to the gospel or they were coming from places where they could be killed for being a Christian. But what excited me most were the stories they were telling about their encounters with Jesus. Sometimes Jesus, it was meeting them in miraculous ways through dreams and through visions.

Now, one man told us about a dream he had where a man he'd never seen before came and told him to follow him. Well, before he could ask this man who he was, this person woke up. So he was in downtown Athens. He happened to see a church. He walked in and there on the wall was a picture of Jesus. It was the man that he saw in his dream. Well, he asked around, found the pastor, asked who this man was like, "This picture on the wall, who is it?" And after the pastor told him about Jesus, he immediately committed his life to becoming a Christian.

Now, the ministry leaders that we met with told us stories about hundreds of refugees who were doing the same thing. And many that we talked with, many of those refugees, they wanted to return back to their home countries, the places they'd fled in order to share the gospel of Jesus' love with their friends, their family, their relatives, even at risk of losing their own lives. What is happening in that area of the world is absolutely unprecedented. There are missionaries who live their entire lives in Muslim communities and only see two or three people come to faith in Christ. Right now, the fastest growing church in the whole world is in Iran. In those places and if in those places, more and more people became followers of Jesus and more and more people bring the love and the justice of Jesus' kingdom in those places, will those countries start to change? Maybe not in my lifetime or in yours, but the seeds that we are planting now will bless the next generation.

And when you think for a moment God moving millions, millions of refugees out of places in this world where they have no access to the gospel and God meeting them in sometimes miraculous ways, God changing history for the next generation because of movements like this, well then God becomes so much bigger, right? And our first world problems, "Oh, my freezer or the ice machine on my refrigerator is broken." Those become so small, so small. And if God can create movements like that where thousands are finding joy, hope, and love through relationship with Jesus, then what can God do in your life?

Being on the front lines of God's mission, it will grow your faith and it will give you courage. So here's your homework. This week, every day, would you pray this prayer? "God, show me my part in your plan. Show me my part in your plan." And then second, would you do one thing you think God might be asking you to do? Just take a step. There'll be members of our global and refugee resettlement team in the lobby who can talk with you and help give you some ideas.

The Westminster Catechism says that the chief end of man is to glorify God and worship Him forever. That's worship. But in a world where there are nearly 2 billion people who have never heard about Jesus and probably will live their lives without hearing about him, I think it's safe to say that global worship does not exist, would you agree? Mission exists because global worship does not. The Apostle Paul writes in Romans 10:13, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." How then can they call on the one they've not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they've not heard? And how can they hear when without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? BelPres, you will have all eternity to enjoy community with one another and to worship God and enjoy Him forever. But we only have this lifetime to join God's passionate pursuit of H.

Is broken world to seek and to save the lost. So Jesus, we thank you for your great love that is so much bigger than anything we can ask for or imagine, a love that's for us, patient with us, redeems us, but a love that also spans the globe for every person, every people group, every ethnicity. We thank you that your mission is so much bigger than anything we can imagine, and it's the whole global church from everywhere to everywhere. So Jesus, would you show us our part in that? Would you make us brave? Would you help us to take the steps you're asking us to take? And we pray this in your name, Jesus. Amen.

Discussion Questions:

Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.

Opening Question: Looking back to last week's sermon and scripture... How did you live differently or practice what we talked about in your life this week? What did you do and how did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions: Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What do you feel when you read this scripture (excited, angry, worried, etc....)? Why do you think that is? (Explain in your group and then take that response to Jesus in prayer this week.)
- As you read this scripture, where does it challenge your current cultural context?

Sermon Reflection Questions: Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- What experiences have you had with Mission?
- What does the Narrative Thread around Mission tell us about God and His Mission?

Closing Question and Application: Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

Closing group prayer: Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.