

The Mosaic of Missions

Sermon preached by Pastor C. John Steer
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Scripture: Genesis 12:1-4
Revelation 7:9-12

Not far from where I grew up in London there is a Roman Ruin. It is called Lullingstone Villa.

The house was built around 75 AD and it was a favorite place for school outings. I remember going there as an 8 year old and gazing with wonder at the villa's exquisite mosaic floor.



It was the first time I had ever seen a mosaic and I was captivated. Our teacher explained how the mosaic was made of pieces of colored glass or tile. Each piece was small and seemingly insignificant in itself but when they were placed in relationship with others they took on a profound beauty which has delighted people for almost 2000 years.

The earliest known mosaics date from the 8th century BC. Mosaic was a technique primarily used for floors and pavements where durability and resistance to wear was vital. However, during the early Christian period wall mosaics came into favor as church decorations and Christians would sit in worship and marvel at these wonderful works of art.



Our missions department have chosen the theme of mosaic for this year's Missions Festival and it is a good one to represent what God is doing in the world through his church.

For God takes each one of us as people uniquely made in his image and he carefully puts us in the place he wants us to be to reflect his love. He places us in relationship with others and as the process continues a pattern of his grace begins to emerge.



Mosaic is a technique appropriate for very large surfaces and God uses the entire planet for his mission mosaic. He uses people of every color and culture. He includes those from every language and political system.

Looking at the work of God in one place at one moment of time may not seem that remarkable but when we pull back and look at the big picture we see the glory of Christ and his cross.

Perhaps like this extraordinary mosaic made in the sixth century.

So today we are going to look at **THE MOSAIC OF MISSIONS**.

Now the temptation at a Missions Festival is to think that missions is an aspect of the church program that is not really for me.

If you haven't had that thought, I commend you.

I certainly have. It is easy to say "I am not called to missions."

But you can't read the word of God and say that with a straight face for the Bible is the story of God creating a beautiful mosaic of his mercy using people who have been transformed by the power of his Spirit.

Missions is the name we give to this task of completing the mosaic under the direction of the Master Artist.

The story starts in Genesis and concludes in Revelation.

Today we will look back at how it began and then look forward to the final masterpiece. So please turn to Genesis chapter 12 in your Bible and take out your message outline.

Here in this first book of the Bible we see **ABRAHAM THE FIRST PIECE**.

This is where the Mosaic of Missions begins.

This passage is pivotal to understanding God's purpose.



First we see that **Abraham was called to address a scattered world**.

It is the Lord who calls Abram which is still his name at this point. We read, **"The Lord had said to Abram." (v 1)**

Mission starts with God's call.

Mission is not just a good idea.

Mission is not just a church program.

Mission is the heart of God's purposes.

God's call comes to Abram at a significant time.

The previous chapter tells the story of the Tower of Babel.

The whole world had one language and a common speech.

The people gather together and say, **"Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we make a name for ourselves." (11:4)**

The purpose of this ziggurat was to reach God.

It is an arrogant attempt by humanity to take its destiny into its own hands but it falls pathetically short and we read,

“The Lord came down to see the city and the tower that the men were building.” (11:5)

God had to come down because man’s best effort was so puny. As a result God’s judgment fell on the people and we read,

“So the Lord scattered them from there all over the earth, and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel – because there the Lord confused the language of the whole world. From there the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth.” (11:8-9)

That is a picture of broken humanity.

We no longer speak the same language.

We can’t communicate with each other, even if we are speaking English. We talk past each other rather than with each other.

Our world is marked with fragmentation and God called Abram, as he calls us, for the purpose of taking these broken pieces and bringing them together in Christ.

The next thing we notice is that **Abraham had to leave his people.**

The Lord said to Abram, **‘Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you’. (v 1)**

Now 4,000 years ago you did not want to leave your people.

Your people were your means of protection and provision.

To walk away from your family invited a life of loneliness and opposition. And yet leaving is essential to God’s plan for the world. Mission begins with a displacement of the Son of God from the bright land of the Trinity.

Jesus applies his sending to his own disciples when he said, **“As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” (John 20:21)**

Missions still involves leaving. It may mean going to another country but even if we remain in our own country, it involves leaving certain things so that we can be placed next to people in relationships so that we can be a witness to them.

“So Abram left, as the Lord had told him.” (v 4)

Think of the impact of that action.

Without this willingness to be displaced there would have been no Jewish story, no biblical story, no international people of God.

Abraham began a pilgrimage with God to a better world of God’s making.

That is how God's mosaic grows.

In the dark days of the Cultural Revolution Chinese church leaders traveled at great risk to minister to unregistered groups of believers.

Methodist preachers, many in their 20's, traveled all over Britain in the 18th century.

To be a child of Abraham means exodus, voyage, pilgrimage, and being a stranger.

Departure is part and parcel of Christian identity.

Then **Abraham had to exercise great trust.**

God assures him, **"I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great." V 2)**

Abraham is 75 at this point yet by the time he 99 and his wife is 90 the promise of a son has still not been fulfilled.

By the time Abraham dies aged 175 the only part of the land he owns is a family burial plot.

His descendants don't reach the Promised Land for 400 years.

So the narrative reminds us that God's time scale is very different from ours.

Despite all these obstacles Abraham trusted that God would keep his word. As a result he is commended in the roll call of the heroes of faith in Hebrews 11 where we read:

"By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going." (Heb. 11:8)

Christianity has been able to take root in an astonishing number of different places because there have been men and women who have been willing to trust God and embed themselves in another culture.

Alopen was a Syriac speaking Persian Christian.

He trusted God and planted the church in China in the 7th century.

This is the way Christianity spread from island to island in the Pacific. Native believers trusted God and left their island for another that was often hostile.

This is the way evangelists from Sierra Leone planted the church in remote areas of their country.

They trusted God and walked for weeks at a time to reach a distant village unsure of the reception they would receive.

Then **Abraham was to bless the people of earth.**

Notice the repetition of the words "bless" or "blessing" in God's commission to the patriarch.

"You will be a blessing, I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." (v 2-3)

Here we see why God chose Abraham.
 He was called to bless others.
 That was why God chose Israel.
 It wasn't because he had favorites.
 It was because Israel were to be his witnesses in the world.
 The great tragedy was that they forgot their calling.
 They imagined they were special.

Similarly God has chosen his church to create his mosaic but the tragedy is that we Christians sometimes think that we were so irresistible that God couldn't help but choose us and rather than go into the world we have withdrawn from the world. Instead of loving the world as Christ did we hate the world.

But perhaps we think the call of Abraham has nothing to do with us. After all we are not Jews.

Yet the New Testament makes it clear that every Christian is a child of Abraham. Paul explains this truth to the Galatians when he writes,

"Those who believe are children of Abraham." (Galatians 3:7)

God wanted to make Abraham a great nation.

In a similar way Peter tells us, **"You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who has called you out of darkness into his wonderful light."**

(1 Peter 2:9)

This is why Christians can claim Abraham's commission as their own. Walter Brueggemann says that the story of Abraham presents us with the crisis of deciding to live either for the promise of God or to live against his promise.

So we have looked back at how the mosaic began in Genesis.

Now we look forward to **HEAVEN - THE FINAL PICTURE.**

This is provided for us in Revelation chapter 7.

It is a splendid scene.

The mosaic is made up from an incredible number.

John writes, **"I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count."** (Rev. 7:9)

Perhaps we have the idea that God's mosaic is a little picture depicting a handful of people.

Don't you believe it. God had told Abraham that his offspring would be as numerous as the sands on the seashore and now John tells us that no one could count them.

This speaks of the global imprint of the cross of Christ.
Jesus didn't die for a few.
There will be millions around his throne.
That is why mission is the greatest enterprise on earth.
If we desire to be involved in something eternally significant then we will want to be part of God's mosaic.

Then we see **this mosaic is made up from people of every nation.**
For this great multitude was comprised, **"From every nation, tribe, people and language." (v 9)**
Here the full number of God's chosen people is gathered in from people from every conceivable category.

No nation is excluded because no people are worthless to the Father. No culture is beyond the mercy of Christ.
No language is unintelligible to the Holy Spirit.
Around the throne are the Taliban and Mujahideen.
People who may have been our enemies become the friends of God when they bow the knee to Christ.

But isn't this just wishful thinking?
Surely the church is losing its influence in the world, not gaining it. That is what some might want you to believe so let me tell you a story.

100 years ago in 1910 the World Missionary Conference was held in Edinburgh, Scotland.
Over 1000 mission leaders representing 162 agencies convened to focus on the unfinished missionary task.
It was the first time in history that so many diverse groups of Christians had come together on a global level.

It was the vision of John R. Mott.
He had been a student at Cornell.
Later he won the Nobel Peace Prize.
He was the leader of the Student Volunteer Movement.

100 years ago there were about 78 million Bible-believing Christians who represented about 3 percent of the world's population. That 1910 world missionary conference started a vast extension of God's mosaic.

100 years later in 2010 there are about 800 million Bible-believing Christians representing about 12 percent of the world's population. During that 100 years the church has exploded.

Latin America has been impacted by the gospel.

So has much of Sub-Saharan Africa.

South Korea has been transformed by the power of Christ.

In 1910 all the delegates were white because at that time the church was largely white and western.

Now the majority of Christians live in the global south.

They are Latino, Asian, and African.

Last month at the Lausanne Missions Conference in Cape Town, the majority of the 4,000 delegates were people of color.

Countries that used to receive missionaries are now sending them. Korea is now sending missionaries to Britain.

Costa Rica is sending missionaries to America.

God's missionary mosaic is expanding.

From time to time people will ask me, "Why are you building a hospital in Guinea when we have folk in our own community who need medical care?"

I agree there are needs here.

But the mosaic is not just made up of Minnesotans.

There will be many people from Guinea in the final picture.

There will be members of the Maninka tribe and the Susa tribe and the Kuranko tribe and the Manya tribe, and the Lelle and the Kissi and the Toma and the Mano tribes and that is why Autumn Ridge is there.

I was supposed to go to Guinea next week along with a team from Autumn Ridge. We have had to cancel the visit because of the violence.

It is frustrating because the American Embassy have suggested they might give us a fully equipped MASH hospital to supplement our work at Compassion Evangelical Hospital.

But first we need to meet with them and show them we can use it.

But the breakdown of law and order in Guinea and the lack of political leadership simply indicates why we must be there.

We don't need to build a hospital in Switzerland.

That country runs beautiful and it is the headquarters of the Red Cross.

But we do need to be in a place like Guinea that desperately needs the gospel because they too are a part of God's mosaic.

Then the best thing about this mosaic is that it is made up from **those right with God.**

They are, **"Standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands."** (v 9)

Do you see the significance of standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb?

This is the very presence of God.

No one can be there and live because we are a sinful people but these have been saved by the blood of the Lamb.

That is why they can stand and live.

They are clothed in white.

Isaiah says, our clothes are like filthy rags. But we have exchanged them for the white robe of Christ's righteousness.

They are clutching palm branches, which were used for occasions of great celebration, and we are told what the celebration is.

This vast crowd cannot contain their excitement and they cry out in a loud voice, **"Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."** (v 10)

That is the ultimate destination of mission.

That is where we are going.

I don't know how long it will take.

It may be a decade, a century, or a millennium.

But this is our future. The mosaic will be complete.

God has guaranteed it.

We too can be part of God's international mosaic around the throne of the Lamb.

That day draws nearer when God's people are placed next to those who need to know him. And every one of us has been put next to people in our family, in our school, in our neighborhood, in our work, who need to see the gospel in our lives and to hear it from our lips.

For the church is a community mandated to reproduce.

The best description of the Mosaic of Mission I know is the Lausanne Covenant. This was drawn up at the first Lausanne gathering in 1974 when Billy Graham invited 2300 Christian leaders to meet together in Lausanne Switzerland to talk about the work of evangelism and missions.

In the past 34 years many churches have adopted this covenant. Our Elders are recommending that Autumn Ridge affirms it as a statement of our commitment to the Great Commission.

We have printed in full on pages 7 to 11 of RidgeLines.
I would encourage you to read it.

Next Sunday at 10:30am Steve Merry will hold a class in the Luther Room for those who would like to study the covenant.
At our Annual Meeting next January we will vote on whether we should become signers of this document.

I think all of it is excellent but just let me direct you to article 4 entitled "**The Nature of Evangelism**".

This is what it says:

To evangelize is to spread the good news that Jesus Christ died for our sins and was raised from the dead according to the Scriptures, and that as the reigning Lord he now offers the forgiveness of sins and the liberating gifts of the Spirit to all who repent and believe.

Our Christian presence in the world is indispensable to evangelism, and so is that kind of dialogue whose purpose is to listen sensitively in order to understand.
But evangelism itself is the proclamation of the historical, biblical Christ as Saviour and Lord, with a view to persuading people to come to him personally and so be reconciled to God.

In issuing the gospel invitation we have no liberty to conceal the cost of discipleship. Jesus still calls all who would follow him to deny themselves, take up their cross, and identify themselves with his new community. The results of evangelism include obedience to Christ, incorporation into his Church and responsible service in the world.