

MISSIONARY DREAMS
Genesis 12:1-4; Matthew 28:16-20

The LORD had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you.

² *“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.*

³ *I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;*

*and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you.”*

⁴ *So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran.*

Genesis 12:1-4 New International Version

¹⁶ *Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. ¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸ Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”*

Matthew 28:16-20 New International Version

I've always wanted to be a missionary.

Now let me stop right there and say—all Christians are missionaries. Every Christian is called to spread the word, shine the light, make a difference. Every Christian is called to follow God in mission to the world.

But when I say I've always wanted to be a missionary, I'm talking about a missionary like Nick and Katie Riddle who spent two years in Africa, or Esther Mueller who's in the Ukraine, or Connie DeLeo, who's in the Dominican Republic. I'm talking about someone who goes overseas to a foreign country and shares the gospel of Christ with people in a different culture.

So for the purposes of this sermon, when I say missionary, that's what I mean. And when I say, "Missions," I mean cross-cultural ministry, usually in a foreign country.

So back to my first statement: I've always wanted to be a missionary.

Now what got me started on this journey? There have been three steps on this journey—three stages to my Missionary Dreams.

To begin with, God used people from a foreign country to lead me into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ! Our annual conference has a program called The Scandinavian Caravan. What happens with this program is that every other year they bring college-age young adults from Methodist churches in Scandinavia, and they come here and share their culture and their faith—and then every other year our conference sends a group over there. And the year I graduated from High School, the Scandinavians came here, and there was something about those folks that got my attention—something about their love and their faith and their witness that captured my heart—and God used these folks to lead me into a relationship with Jesus Christ.

And so the next year, I applied to be part of the group from here, North Carolina, that went there, to Scandinavia—and oh, my goodness, it was amazing—to be in a different culture, to learn their customs, to eat their food, to be surrounded by their beautiful language—to stand there and sing How Great Thou Art—except they were singing it in the original Swedish. There's just nothing like worshipping with people from a different country. And the best part was when I got up to share my witness and I was able to say, "Hey, y'all, when you came to the United States last year, God used you to lead me to Christ!"

So at this point, I was thinking, "Missions is fun. I want to be a missionary 'cause it's fun. It'll be interesting and exciting!"

That was **Stage One: "Missions is Fun."**

But then I learned something else.

I went to a student mission conference in Urbana, Illinois—17,000 college students all interested in missions. And we heard amazing speakers—Billy Graham was one of the speakers—and I was confronted with the immense needs of the world—a billion starving people—two billion who have never heard the name of Jesus Christ—and as a young college student, I was moved to the depths of my soul.

What I learned at the missions conference in Urbana was that missions was not just exciting and interesting—it was needed!

And that was **Stage Two: Missions is Important.**

But then I learned something else.

As I kept following this interest in missions, and studying and learning and going to lectures, I learned that God's heart for all nations is the theme of the entire Bible!

The story of the Bible is the story of God's mission to the world!

It starts with God's call to Abraham in Genesis, chapter 12. This is the beginning of God's covenant with Israel. And God says to Abraham,

"I will bless you ...

and you will be a blessing ...

*and **all nations on earth** will be blessed through you."*

--Genesis 12:2-3

And there it is, right there at the beginning of the Bible—"all nations on earth"—that's missions—that's concern for the entire world!

And you see this theme repeated throughout the Old Testament. God makes that same promise to Abraham's son Isaac—"all nations on earth will be blessed through you"—and then to Isaac's son Jacob—"all nations on earth will be blessed through you."

And you read the Bible stories and you can see God's passion to reach all nations. David says to Goliath, "I will defeat you ...

*"...and the **whole world will know** that there is a God in Israel."*

--1 Samuel 17:46

And you see Daniel witnessing to the Babylonians, and Jonah witnessing to the Assyrians, and Esther witnessing to the Persians.

You read the Psalms, and you see phrases like, "*Declare his glory among the nations;*" "*Let all the nations sing;*" "*Let all the nations worship.*" And Psalm 67 says,

*May God be gracious to us and bless us ...
So that your ways may be known on earth,*

Your salvation among all nations.

--Psalm 67:1-2

And you get to the book of Isaiah and God says to his people Israel,

*“...I will give you as a light to the **nations**,
that my salvation may reach **to the end of the earth.**”*

--Isaiah 49:6

And then—and then—you get to the Gospel of Matthew and you read the story of Jesus, and the last thing Jesus says—his last command—is,

*“...go and make disciples of **all nations**”*

--Matthew 28:19

And so what I came to realize is that God’s heart for all nations is the theme of the entire Bible.

And that’s stage three of my journey. I went from “Missions is fun” to “Missions is important” to

Stage Three: Missions is the Theme of the Entire Bible.

And when I was in college I went to a missions rally, where this was explained, and at that rally I signed a pledge that said, *“Unless God clearly directs otherwise, I will serve as an international missionary.”*

Well, as it turned out, God clearly directed otherwise. My first year out of seminary, I was appointed to start a new church in Charlotte. That was definitely a God thing.

By the time I was finished with that appointment, Lorie had developed a grant-writing business, and our children had come along, and I began to fulfill my missionary dreams in other ways. I became really good friends with Pastor Sam Om—some of you remember him—my Cambodian friend who was here last summer.

I worked with Sam to reach out to the Cambodian community here in North Carolina, and I worked with Sam to support his mission work in Cambodia—

And then, Sam took *me* to Cambodia. And I got to preach and I got to teach, and it was just amazing.

And then my last church had a mission in Nicaragua, so I went down with them, and I got to preach in Spanish. I got to do a baptism, and a mass wedding in Spanish. We

had some folks on the team who had medical skills, so we put on a medical clinic, and my job was to pray with people after they saw the doctor.

And one more thing I got to do: I got to eat fried Iguana.

It tastes like chicken.

And then, just a few years ago, I conducted a two-week pastor's school for United Methodist local pastors in the East African country of Tanzania. These local pastors have the equivalent of a seventh-grade education. They have not been to Bible College or Seminary, so missionary Eric Soard invited me to come and do a sort of crash course in Christian Doctrine and Preaching.

Now, here's where all this is going: I've been invited to go back to Tanzania and teach two college-level courses at a new university being started by the United Methodist Church. I have also been invited to go back to Cambodia and teach pastors there.

I believe that this is the contribution I can make to the needs of the world. I'm not a doctor or a nurse; I'm not real good at building things; but I can teach. And after a lot of prayer, I feel that now is the time to follow God's leading and the dream He instilled in me.

So, this fall, God willing, I'll be going to Tanzania to teach. That trip will last about three weeks, and I'll also need to spend a lot of time preparing to teach these two classes.

And then next February, God willing, I'll be going to Cambodia. And again, the trip will last three weeks, and I'll need a lot of time beforehand to prepare.

Now, please listen carefully: Because I feel called to do both these trips in one year, I believe that I need to step down from pastoral ministry for the 2018-2019 conference year, which runs from July to June. In the United Methodist Church, we have this thing called Sabbatical Leave. It allows a United Methodist pastor to step down from pastoral ministry for one year without pay to pursue a program of study or travel. I have applied for this relationship with the Annual Conference, and it has been granted, so as of July 1, I will be on Sabbatical and—this is the hard part—this is the part I'm not excited about—I will no longer be your pastor. The bishop will appoint a new Senior Pastor to replace me. We will announce who that is three weeks from today on April 29. Since you are getting a new Senior Pastor, I will not be able to return to Main Street. When I come off my year of Sabbatical, I will be appointed to another church.

I want you to know that this is a difficult choice. I'm excited about pursuing my Missionary Dreams. I am not excited about leaving Main Street. I love this church. You are a great church. From my first Sunday in July of 2014—four years ago—I have felt a very strong connection to this church.

Now, please listen carefully because I want to try to answer some of the questions that might be rolling around in your mind. The first question you might be asking is, “*Why are you leaving? What’s wrong?*” And the answer is, there’s nothing wrong. I am not mad at anybody. Nobody has asked me to leave. The bishop is not making me sit out for a year. I truly feel called to pursue these two opportunities to be a missionary, if only for three weeks at a time.

Second question you might be asking: “*Claude—if you’re taking two trips that are three weeks each, then why are you stepping aside for an entire year?*” Here’s why: It’s not just the three weeks of being away. It’s also the weeks and weeks of preparing to teach and preparing to travel. And after a lot of prayer, I came to the conclusion that I need to focus on these mission opportunities, and you need a Senior Pastor who is focused on the mission of Main Street. And so, I need to step aside and let a new Senior Pastor be appointed.

Understand also, that in addition to the mission work, I also plan to pursue a program of study in the art of storytelling. I’m signed up for a week-long workshop with a well-known storyteller named Donald Davis, and I’m planning to attend the National Storytelling Festival in Tennessee, and as many other workshops and festivals as I can get involved in. Many of you have complimented my storytelling. I would like to hone that skill to speak to people of all ages.

Another thing I’ll be doing during this Sabbatical year is spending a lot of time with family. I’ve got a son and his wife and my grandson who live in Asheville, and—get ready for this—***a new grandbaby on the way.*** I’ve got a daughter in Chicago. I’ve got elderly parents who live in Greensboro, but I don’t see them near as much as I want to. So when I’m not preparing to teach, going overseas to teach, or attending a storytelling workshop, I plan to spend extra time with family.

Third question: *Where will Lorie and I live?* Some years ago we bought a house at Lake Junaluska so we’d have a place to retire. Many of you know that Lake Junaluska is the Methodist Holy Land. It’s where old Methodist preachers go to die. Well, since we have this house, that’s where we’ll live during this one-year Sabbatical.

Fourth question: *Why am I doing this now?* Well, the opportunities I’ve been given to go and teach are available now. They might not be available later. After a lot of prayer and soul-searching, I feel called to pursue these opportunities while they are available.

Final question: *How much time do I have left at Main Street?* Those of you who are familiar with our Methodist system know that our conference year runs from July to June, so I’ll be here through most of the month of June, and then the new pastor will start in July. So that’s about three months from now.

I’ve always wanted to be a missionary—and you, Main Street, have always been a missions-minded church. So please consider me your latest missionary. When I leave in

July, please don't say, "We've lost our pastor." Instead, say, "We've sent out another missionary."

I want to close with this quote from a theologian named Emil Brunner:

Mission work does not arise from any arrogance in the Christian Church; mission is its cause and its life. **The Church exists by mission, just as a fire exists by burning.** Where there is no mission, there is no Church; and where there is neither Church nor mission, there is no faith ... Mission, Gospel preaching, is the spreading out of the fire which Christ has thrown upon the earth. Those who burn propagate the fire. Those who do not propagate the fire show that they themselves are not burning.

Emil Brunner, *The Word and the World*