

Missionaries for the Nations Nearby

Meta

Date: February 4, 2024

Location: Apostles Anglican Church

Readings

Genesis 12:1–3

Psalms 86:8–13

Revelation 7:9–17

Matthew 28:16–20

Opening

Let us begin with the end, which may sound like a strange approach to World Mission Sunday. Let us begin with the **goal** of all history.¹ Let us turn our eyes to the *images* of the end of all things. Yes, with mission to the nations set before us today, the Church follows St. John as he guides us to the throne room of God:

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!”²

This was the vision John received at the beginning of his apocalypse, and he beholds an even grander vision of God at the end of his vision in Revelation 21:

*And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. **By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, and its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. They will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations.**³*

The kings of earth will bring their glory; the nations will bring their treasures and place their offerings at the feet of the Lamb of God.

¹ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 115.

² *Revelation 7.9-10*

³ *Revelation 21.22-26*

Earthly emperors have always had a vision for the nations, too. King Darius and his son, Xerxes, built the imperial capital of Persepolis for their Persian Empire. Conquered peoples would travel great distances to Persepolis, ascend a grand staircase, enter the palace through the Gate of All Nations, and bring their offerings to the feet of Persian kings like Darius and Xerxes. Such was the vision of ancient imperial glory.⁴

You can visit Persepolis today. It is a palace in ruins, her kings long dead. Nations no longer kneel before Persian, Greek, or Roman emperors. That is not where history ends. The goal of history is an eternal city, whose eternal light is the King of Kings, Jesus Christ. By his light the nations will walk, and the kings of the earth will come to him. They will bring all the treasures of their cultures, the 'honor of their nations,' their own particular beauty and glory, will be offerings presented at the feet of King Jesus. On their lips will be the song, 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!' All peoples who confess Christ as Lord will say, 'He is *our* God!' Gone will be the gods of empires; all national idols will be ground to dust. The nations will say, 'This is our God and he has saved us!'

That's the end of this story. When we see where this story is going, we see the heart of God for the nations. And we also can make sense of the mission we're given and our place in God's mission.

Affection for the Nations

There are so many avenues we could explore with these readings and the theme of World Mission Sunday. With the end of the story in mind, with a vision of God's eternal city before our eyes, with the call to mission placed before us, I want us to begin with the heart. If God's mission to all nations doesn't take root in our hearts, we may hear our gospel commission as a chore or a kind of spiritual homework assignment, rather than the

Wendell Berry might be an unlikely figure to quote on World Mission Sunday, but I'm doing it anyway. When Berry had the opportunity in 2012 to address national dignitaries about his mission, to cultivate wise care for local places and the land, he entitled his address, 'It All Turns on Affection.' Berry knew that it's a tough sell to get bureaucrats to care about soil, so he focused their attention on their affections.

Let me transpose that same question for us. What nation(s) do you love? You don't need a well-stamped passport to love the nations. In fact, you don't need a passport at all to love another land with the love of Christ.

I have never visited Vietnam, but when the Lord gave me four dear Vietnamese friends in high school, a new affection was born in my heart. I learned the traumatic story of their departure from Vietnam, the painful separation from family members. I discovered their Catholic faith. And yet, my affection for my friends wasn't these deeply emotional matters. I grew to love their food, their stories, their customs, their humor. What nations do you love?

Apostles made it possible for me to take a pilgrimage to Greece last October. I can't thank you enough. On the last night of my pilgrimage, I hiked to the highest point of Thessaloniki, that ancient city where the Apostle Paul first proclaimed the Gospel. Churches and monasteries abound in that city now, but so little of the population attend worship. Greece is descending into secularism like so

⁴ Newbigin, 115. Newbigin considers that St John may have had Persepolis in mind when recording his vision in Revelation 21.

many other nations. Our guide asked us to pray over Thessaloniki, so I did. It's fascinating. In the churches there, the incense they used was almost always a fragrant scent of rose. Ever since, when I smell rose, I'm transported there. I think it's an invitation to pray.

God uses the smallest things to stir our loves—things like fragrances and foods. The call to mission is not exclusively spiritual conversations. Mission begins with our loves. Our love gets cultivated when we befriend people from other lands, when we discover the treasures of a culture, and bring the story of other nations into your own heart. What nations do you love?

Christians are people who love the nations for their own sake. In other words, it's not just for our own enjoyment, for our tourist experiences. We desire God's great goodness, that his salvation would reach down into every tribe, tongue, and nation.

Remember how the story ends—the nations will bring their honor and their glory to the feet of King Jesus. The riches of culture—songs, art, folkways, landscapes, gardens, architecture—all these things are meant to glorify King Jesus. So let the gifts of culture stir your heart for the nations.

To be sure, nothing unholy in any culture can be presented as a pure offering to our Lord. That's true for every nation and culture, America included. But Christians are people who desire the salvation of every nation. And salvation is not only deliverance. Salvation means right worship, bringing right offerings to glorify King Jesus.

So baptize your love for other lands, places, and people. Go deeper. Cultivate that love, stir up the affection. Let your loves lead you to prayer and intercession. And let your heart lead you to deeper friendships with international neighbors, too.

The Nations Nearby

A few months ago, I shared with you the story and the writings of one of my spiritual heroes, Madeleine Delbrel. I quote her again today, for this beautiful saint of God remains a prophetic voice for our times. In 1943, Madeleine Delbrel called the Church to mission nearby saying:

In every age, the Holy Spirit has compelled all lovers to seek the desert. We, missionaries without a boat, are seized by the same love and led by the same Spirit into new deserts....The Word of God is not brought to the ends of the world in a suitcase. We carry it in ourselves...We cannot be missionaries if we have not sincerely, generously, and warmly welcomed the Word of God, the Gospel, within ourselves. The vital dynamic of this word is to take on flesh, to become flesh in us. And when this word comes to dwell within us, we become capable of being missionaries.⁵

How the world has changed since 1943, yet how true these words remain for us. Mission to the nations does not require a plane ticket or a suitcase. Down the street from your home, down the hall of your apartment, live men, women, and children born in other lands, who have made their home in Knoxville. What story do they bear in their souls? What have they endured? What have their people endured? Do you know?

⁵ Madeleine Delbrel, *We, The Ordinary People of the Streets*,

When I was 22, before I enrolled in seminary, I taught one semester at a night high school in Hendersonville, TN. That would have made for a good trivia question on Shrove Tuesday, but I've spoiled it now. I taught Internet Navigation and Microsoft Office applications to high school students.

Half of my students attended night school because they had been expelled from public schools. The other half were Sudanese immigrants, some of whom may have been the Lost Boys of Sudan.

When students would arrive before the bell, they had between five to ten minutes to browse the web. American girls were on websites looking for prom dresses, American boys were looking at speakers to add to their cars. The Sudanese students were always reading news reports about the civil war back home.

Most of my Sudanese students were in their 20s. I believe all of them were Christians. They attended night high school from 4pm-10.30pm and then most of them would work third shift to provide for their families.

They knew and loved Christ. Evangelism wasn't the need in that case. What was needed was for him to see the nations nearby. To learn that which they suffered and receive that story into my soul.

They suffered greatly, but my goodness, that doesn't define them. I loved their gentleness and kindness. And Sudanese humor is wonderful! (Story of election; 'We like this guy')

It has been said that a vast majority of international students who study in the U.S., possibly 75%, never receive an invitation for dinner in an American home during their school years.⁶ If that's true of our universities, then the numbers probably aren't much better for permanent residents of the U.S. Who is near you? What is their story? What beauty resides in our international neighbors we haven't met? If our neighbors don't know, love, and worship Christ yet, can you envision what their life would be if they offered themselves to Him? What good things from their culture could they bring to honor King Jesus? That's how the story ends, right? And maybe that ending helps us find our place in God's mission—we, who also are missionaries without a boat. The nations are nearby, and all nations find their glory when they kneel in worship at the feet of Jesus.

Closing

In the arc of this Epiphany season, we begin with the nations and, as it draws to a close, we meditate on the nations again. Epiphany begins with three Magi kneeling at the Manger of the infant Jesus. Best we can surmise, these sages traveled from ancient Persia, too. Might they have set off from that ancient imperial city of Persepolis en route to Bethlehem? We do not know. But we do know they brought their treasures, knelt down, and offered treasures from their nations to King Jesus. The three Magi kneeling at the manger of the infant Jesus was not only the fulfillment of a prophecy from Isaiah. Their sojourn to Bethlehem prophesied the end of history, too. Theirs was a foreshadowing of the throne room St John saw when he looked upon the New Jerusalem.

In the end, the nations will sing with one voice, 'Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!' Oh, that the song of the heavenly city would stir our affections *now*, that the vision of the Holy and Eternal City would transform our hearts *now*. I give the last word to my hero, Madeleine Delbrel:

⁶ <https://newwineskins.org/blog/2018/11/19/making-room-at-your-table-for-international-students>

Won't this love that dwells in us, that explodes in us, also transform us? Lord, Lord let the thick skin that covers me not be a hindrance to you. Pass through it. My eyes, my hand, my mouth are yours.⁷

Let us pray:

O God you have made of one blood all the peoples of the earth, and sent your blessed Son to preach peace to those who are far off and those who are near; grant that people everywhere may seek after you and find you; bring the nations into your fold; pour out your Spirit upon all flesh; and hasten the coming of your Kingdom; through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

⁷ *Delbrel, 61.*