

Sermon: *Where Are You? Come Back Home...*

Scripture: **Genesis 3:8, 9**

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There is profound gratitude in my heart as I stand before you. Thank you for sending to us in Guatemala over the past 6 years this church's finest young people. Every once in awhile Pastor Dan sends me an update on each one and I just kneel in awe before the Lord amazed at what He is doing in these young lives.

Do you realize that 90% of career missionaries presently on the field went on a missions trip during their formative years and many look back and say that's when God began to nudge them toward missions as a vocation. There are today alumni of our Missions Exposure Adventure serving in 23 countries around the world as career missionaries. By the way, if you want some inside stuff on Dan Curnutt, let's speak in private. It's amazing how a fellow will act when he is far from home. Just kidding!

I have a question for you this morning: When did missions start? That's a key question because it has to do with biblical roots and our responsibility to missions today. One of the basic principles in the study of the Bible is to go back in time and study carefully where a truth or teaching is first mentioned in the Bible. Looking at a truth in its simplest form will many times unveil its very heart, its very essence. I believe that this is case with the beginning of missions. And for this we have to go back to the book of beginnings: Genesis.

Turn to chapter three. Do you recall what were the very first words said after Adam and Eve sinned? No cheating now... Don't read ahead. Try to remember, because in these words we will find the very beginning of missions. Okay, time's up. Look at **Gen. 3:8,9** "*And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife HID themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. vs. 9 then the Lord God called to the man, and said to him* (here it is folks in three simple but extremely profound words), ***WHERE ARE YOU?***

Now, don't you think that this is a strange question for God to ask? He is God and He knows everything. He knew where they were hiding. I believe that there is another question behind this question. He was simply saying in other words: *What in the world are you doing so far from home? I know what you did was a very bad thing and there will be consequences. But I want for you to come back home. Come back to where you belong, come back to my loving arms. I forgive you. Please repent and come back home.*

In these 3 words **WHERE ARE YOU**, God reveals that in the very core of His nature is His concern for the lostness of man. This is the very first missions outreach recorded in history. God, Himself, is the missionary. He is the evangelist reaching out. He takes the initiative to break the wall of silence created by sin and tries to woo fallen man back to Himself. Missions began with God Himself, with His very nature. Have you ever noticed that you don't have to hunt for missionary passages in the Bible? It's because the entire Bible from the beginning to the end is the historical account of our missionary God reaching out to man and convincing him of his need for salvation and that is what missions is all about.

One of the first responsibilities that man had was to populate the earth, to scatter throughout the world and reflect the image, the glory of God. But **Gen. 11** says that mankind disobeyed and stayed in one location and built a huge tower as a monument to himself. What did God do? He confused man's language and forced mankind to scatter over the face of the whole earth. Here God once again is showing His interest in reaching the whole world. Then in **Gen. 12** God really reveals the details of His plan to reach a lost world.

What a unique plan that was. One man was chosen. He was an elderly fellow of 75 years of age, recently saved out of idolatry, married to a 65 year old woman who physically could not bear children. But to this unlikely couple God says: **Gen. 12:1-3** *"I will make of you Abraham a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great and in you ALL the families of the earth shall be blessed."* Blessing here means to impart spiritual profit. God was going to reach out with His salvation to all the peoples of the world through this special nation. Through Israel God was going to cry to a lost world: **Where Are You? Come back home?** In fact, we see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob acting as Jehovah's missionaries when they built altars throughout the land of Israel.

Gen. 12:8 says: *he (Abraham) built an altar to the Lord and called upon the name of the Lord.* Actually a more accurate translation would be. *He built an altar to the Lord and **proclaimed** the name of the Lord.* But who was there to listen to Abraham's proclamation? There were plenty of lost people for sure.

You see, God had placed Israel in a most strategic geographical location, right smack in the middle of the known world of that time. In fact the Jewish rabbis called Israel the center of the universe with Jerusalem as her navel. If you were to look at a map you would see that back then in order to travel between 3 continents, Europe, Asia and Africa, you would have to go back and forth through Israel. Israel became an international highway for armies and caravans. The caravans not only carried merchandize and passengers but also provided the postal and news system of that time. And as these multitudes moved through Israel they heard about this unique nation that proclaimed one true God and the only way of salvation was through faith in Him accompanied with animal sacrifice, the shedding of innocent blood.

Israel truly became God's evangelistic center. **Deut. 7:7** says that Israel was to be a holy and special people... a nation of priests, a nation of missionaries. Israel was to act as a go-between, between Jehovah and the pagan nations. Isaiah's sums it up in **Isa. 43:9-11**... when he says that Jehovah invites the nations of the earth to gather in Israel to hear God's witness, to hear from the mouth of Jews that He is the Lord and there is no other Savior besides Jehovah. It wasn't too long before Israel had achieved great fame just like God promised in the Abrahamic covenant.

During Solomon's reign nations around the world sent official representatives to Israel to see this amazing country and hear what the great Jewish God Jehovah had done for them. **1 Kings 4:34** says *that men came from all peoples to hear the wisdom of Solomon, from all the kings of the earth who had heard of his wisdom!* Behind all of this was the missionary heart of God reaching out to a fallen humanity crying out through Israel: **Where Are You? Come back home!** But then around the year 950 B.C. things began to fall apart. Israel wanted to become like the pagan nations around her and in the process compromised her position before God and the unsaved world. Corruption set in. Israel was split into two nations and civil war caused brother to kill brother and the spiral downward gathered speed.

The situation got so bad and evil that God used 2 pagan nations: Assyria and Babylon to punish and purify His chosen nation. God's people were uprooted and led far away into captivity. Then the real tragedy struck when in 586 b.C. the temple was destroyed and Ezekiel tells us that the glory of God had left. Israel had become the laughing stock of the world, a byword, a curse. God's missionary base was shut down. You could barely hear the whisper: **Where Are you? Come back home!** But then God remembered His promise to Abraham to evangelize the world through the Jewish nation. Even while Israel was in captivity in faraway Babylon a remnant, a core group of Jews spoke of Jehovah and his law. Through the Jew's presence monotheism made an impact in Babylon which was the most important country in the world at that time. The synagogue system was created providing cohesiveness for the scattered Jews.

Through the Persian King, Cyrus, some of the Jews returned to the promised land to reconstruct Jerusalem and especially the temple. However, the O.T. closes with very much weakened Israel. Then between the Old and New Testaments 400 years of silence occur when God doesn't speak through His prophets but He does start a drum roll through historical events. Greece and Rome were used by God to prepare the world for the appearance of someone special. Our missionary God was about to do something great.

The New Testament begins with the presentation to the world of God's model missionary: Jesus Christ, God's Son. In Bethlehem God's glory returned in the form of the baby Messiah. His purpose in coming was to seek and save those who were lost, to cry out to a lost humanity: **Where are you? Come back home?** And Jesus

died on a cross as the ultimate and complete sacrifice for the sin of mankind. His resurrection was God the Father's approval of the life and work of His son. Before His death & resurrection Jesus chose a most unlikely bunch of fellows that were to form the leadership of a new entity: the church of Jesus Christ. God's new channel of blessing to the world received her commission: *All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go into the world and make disciples of all the nations... all ethnos... all ethnic groups, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son and the H.S. Mat. 28:20*

Each member of Christ's church is to be His witness so says **Acts. 1:8-9** After receiving power from the H.S. Christians are to be witness of Jesus way beyond the border of their nations. We are to ambassadors of Christ pleading that mankind to be reconciled to God, through Christ. Crying out **Where are You? Come back home!**

The New Testament ends with the Apostle Paul, within 30 years, almost single-handily laying the foundation of the church in the Roman Empire... Over 2,000 years have slipped by and the question is where do we stand today in terms of missions at the beginnings of a new millennium?

Well there is good news and bad news. The good news is really, really good. And, the bad news is really, really serious. First the GOOD news. The percentage of the entire world population that claims to be personal followers of Jesus Christ has grown from 3 percent to over 12 percent during my short lifetime! This is phenomenal news! When I was born in 1946 (now don't start doing the math to figure how how I am – I'm just forever young), But since 1946 there were 80 million people in the entire world who claimed to be personal followers of Jesus Christ. Today, There are over 700 million devoted followers of Christ! And, the number of true believers continues to grow, and the percentage of true believers continues to grow.

One example is what happened in the early 1950s when all the ex-patriot missionaries were expelled from China, there were 850,000 believers throughout that country. Today there are at least 60 million believers in China and many China watchers would say that the number is closer to 100 million believers! And God is doing great things behind the scenes in places we would never dream of. This is the **GOOD** news! Now the **BAD** news and it's very serious. Let me repeat the sobering statistics. In a world over 6 billion people 9 out of every 10 people are lost and outside of personal faith in Jesus Christ. Moreover, 2 out of every 3 people living in the world have never once heard a clear explanation of the Gospel of Jesus. Furthermore, 1 out of every 3 people in the world (that's 2 billion) has no one living near enough to tell him about Jesus, even if he wants to hear.

Let's use China once again as an example: Even with close to 100 million believers in China, there are still more lost people in that one country than all the lost people in North America, Central America, South America, and Africa combined! This is bad news indeed. Presently there are 6000 foreign career missionaries sent from

Evangelical churches in the USA. We have a huge problem because this foreign missionary force is ageing. In Guatemala CAM International has 52 missionaries. Do you know what their average age is? 62 years old. When all my colleagues gather in one spot you can only see white hair. And the disturbing reality is that by the time new and younger personnel enter the field our work force will soon be whittled down to just a handful.

In the light of what the Lord requires of us and the tremendous need of the Gospel throughout the world I have to ask you personally: To what degree are you involved in getting the message of Jesus Christ to those who have never heard? Starting with your unsaved neighbours, but more importantly to those you don't have access to the news of Jesus death and resurrection? I heard the Gospel when I was 17 years old from Mrs. Francine Baird in Nokomis, Florida. She was the one that God used to ask me **WHERE ARE YOU? COME BACK HOME**. 28 years ago the Lord used Ann and me to witness to Mildred and Manolo and now they are here ministering to you.

You see God has locked Himself into only using the human voice to proclaim His Gospel. There is no other way – but human instrumentality to cry out. Where are you? Come back home. I have to share something with you that came from a Pastor friend of mine who pastors an Ev. Free Church in Tampa, Fl. Listen to this: **"My friend, Grace**, was about as ordinary as anyone I've every known. She didn't seem to be a likely candidate for high-impact ministry. She lived in an old farmhouse on Strawtown Pike in a rural area of North-Central Indiana. One of her legs was shorter than the other, and she walked around with a signature limp. She was in her seventies, and she wore her wiry gray hair up in a bun. She usually wore a colorful dress and nylon stockings that sometimes bagged a little around the ankles.

Grace and her husband had raised five boys, but by her senior years, they were grown and living with their families in other places. When her husband passed away, she found herself in a strange season of life – with fewer responsibilities and meaningful things to do. She often prayed that God would give her something significant to do for Him in her final years. She wanted to sprint to the finish line. Grace once told me, "I don't know how God could use an old woman like me, but if He'll show me what He wants me to do, I'll do it!" I got to be a firsthand witness as God answered her prayers.

One day, she was reading a prison-ministry magazine and found an open letter from an inmate named Bobby, who had recently become a Christian. Bobby was looking for a "Godly grandmother" who would disciple him. Grace wrote the magazine editor ... and got connected with Bobby. She wasn't sure what to do with her new spiritual grandson but she found some correspondence Bible studies and began leading him through them. Soon, Bobby led his cellmate to Christ and Grace became his spiritual grandmother, too. Not long afterward, I visited her for lunch and she showed me pictures of her growing group of "seven boys" – each of whom had become a

Christian through Bobby's influence. "I'm having the time of my life!" she exclaimed as she shared with me each of their personal stories. "Right now I've got a captive audience," she said with a smile and a twinkle in her eye, "but I figure they won't be in prison for the rest of their lives.

Today, they'll impact the lives of their fellow inmates, and some day, they'll get out of prison and impact the world for Christ." I stopped by her house again a number of months later ... "Oh, Dwight, a lot has happened since you were last here. God has done more with this ministry than I ever imagined." "Did you know that prisoners get transferred?" ... "I'm now leading Bible studies with inmates in three prisons – all from my little farmhouse!" I continued to make regular trips to Grace's house to check up on her. The last time I went she had a world map up on her wall with dots all over the Americas. "Grace, what are all these dots?" I asked in amazement. "These are my boys and all their extras," she replied. "My boys started getting out of prison and they'd lead their wives, children and other family members to Christ. So they asked me if I would be their spiritual grandma to their family members as well.

Those are the 'extras' that I never expected God to make a part of my spiritual family." "But what are all these dots in Latin countries?" I asked. She told me that some of the Hispanic inmates had introduced her to their Spanish-speaking friends and family members when they got out of prison. She started receiving letters written in Spanish from people in Cuba, so she prayed that God would send her someone who could translate. God led her to a retired Spanish teacher named Clara ... "We're now discipling more than a thousand Spanish-speaking people. Clara comes over to my house three days a week to translate their correspondence. I've even added seven college students who volunteer with us."

A few months later I called her ... I asked her a question I'd wanted to ask her for a long time. "Grace, how many people are you corresponding with?" ... after some coaxing, I finally got her to give me a number. "I don't know the exact number. Last I counted, there were more than ten thousand." I was shocked ... what an amazing thing to witness! God had chosen to send ripples through all of eternity through an old, gray-haired widow and an odd assortment of her friends out of a farmhouse on Strawtown Pike in the Middle of Nowhere, Indiana. **WHERE ARE YOU? COME BACK HOME.** Father, we acknowledge this morning that the missionary mandate continues to be in force and you expect each one of us to be obedient. Truly you still place your treasure in clay pots. May yours be the glory forevermore. In Jesus Name....

You see, I was sweet on her daughter, Marcia and she was keen that the boy dating her daughter become a believer in Jesus. Back then I was one mixed up kid. On Sunday mornings you would find me as an altar boy assisting in the Catholic Mass. Sunday evenings I would be at the Baptist church sitting in the back pew holding hands with Marcia and had one eye on her while the other eye was on the preacher. Finally throughout all that

teenage craziness, God punched through. On Sept. 23, 1962 I knelt beside my bed and asked Jesus to be my savior. My folks were not please at all about my change in religion as they called it and my brother treated me as though I had an incurable, highly contagious disease.

Well after one year of witnessing to him he also got contaminated with this incurable disease. Joe went on to Columbia Bible College and Capitol Bible Seminary. He served as missionary in Portugal for 20 years. He who was so violently opposed the Gospel, is today the dean of the graduate school at Moody Bible Institute. God really moved in my heart during my last 2 years of high school in terms of evangelism and missions. Just by taking my Bible to school mixed in with my textbooks I was able to start a movement on campus for Jesus. By the end of my senior year we had the whole side of the gymnasium packed with students for a 15 minute pep rally for Jesus just before home bell would ring for the first class of the day. Wow! From that group of kids: Scotty went on to Spain as a missionary, Jeff to Italy, Jeannie to New Guinea, Joe to Portugal, Bob to Guatemala.

I met my bride during my first year at Bible college. Ann grew up as a missionary kid in the Amazonian jungles. Her parents ministered the Gospel to a tribe of stone-age Indians. She learned Campa, the tribal language and Spanish also. By the age of 10 she was teaching Sunday class to her peers in the tribe. She ate stuff like monkey meat and learned how to wring the neck of a chicken all in preparation for the day she was going to meet and marry a fellow half Porto Rican and half Portuguese. For 40 years now we have served with CAM International in Guatemala. Most of those years as profs at the Guatemalan Bible Seminary. One day 28 years ago I was surfing the TV channels

Listen to a quote from a great missionary statesman that might help put things into perspective in your own life: “Acknowledging Christ as Lord demands an active pursuit of God’s purposes in the world. It means commitment of one’s total life to make the greatest impact for J.C. on this generation. And for those who are not yeat certain of God’s vocational appointment in life, true discipleship must surely include complete openness to this most needed and most neglected of all vocations – missionary service among those who have little or no access to the Gospel?”

You know, when I come to Tampa I love making a stop at Ed Jeweritz Action lock and Safe store. Because of the security issues that we face in Guatemala I just love to wander about huge safes and see the newest gadgets in the markets that pretend to keep us one step ahead of the thieves. But my greatest pleasure is sitting down with Ed and just chatting about how things are going at Oakwood, the privileges that he has to serve. But you know what? The conversation always centers on the marvellous opportunities that Ed and his family have to witness to the lost. Great stories are told of miraculous conversions to Christ. And I recall the last time I visited

the store I left saying to myself if this is indicative of what is going on throughout the body of believers at Oakwood, the church is on the right track. I heard that 15% of the congregation has already been on a missions trip. Fantastic.

Do you realize that 90% of career missionaries presently on the field went on a missions trip during their formative years and many look back and say that when God began to nudge toward missions as a vocation. I would like for you to do me a favor: with the thumb of your right hand try to sense the pulse on the main vein on the wrist of your left hand. Some might discover it difficult to find a pulse, for this we have medical personnel handy to jump-start your heart. Do you feel it? Now ask yourself. Is my heart beating in cadence with the heart of God? Am I being God's mouthpiece crying out where I live, work or go to school the words: **WHERE ARE YOU? Come back home!** Am I praying to the Lord of the Harvest to send more workers out as missionaries? Am I willing to go myself if He calls?